

Philip: Hello, inclusion believers, and welcome to the Access Champions podcast. I'm your host, Phil Dallmann, for this week's journey into the galaxy of accessibility and inclusion. We've got a jam packed episode for you this week, so we're gonna dive right on in. Uh, our guest this week is Michelle Bishop, who is the Disability Advocacy Specialist for Voting Rights for the National Disability Rights Network. Besides bringing a wealth of knowledge to the podcast, I was, uh, super excited to have Michelle on because she's sort of our first organic guest. We highlighted an article she wrote for the Huffington Post on episode four of the podcast, our first episode where we kind of highlighted different articles and things that were happening around the country, around the world. And we were able to connect via social media, um, and she so graciously agreed to come on the podcast and chat about the current state of our voting system and the tenuous nature of voting rights for many people in our country.

Philip: Speaking of organic (laughs), my phone just lit up. Uh, my fiance just found her wedding dress, uh, which is very, very exciting. So, uh, shout out Zanza Steinberg, my soon-to-be wife, uh, who found her wedding dress today. Um, very exciting. (laughs)

Philip: Before we get to the interview, um, I do also wanna give a quick shout out to, uh, Karamo Brown, one of the stars of Netflix's Queer Eye. Uh, Karamo really stepped up over the last month or so, uh, to join in pushing Netflix in increasing the quality of their captions for viewers with hearing loss. And additionally, he pushed his followers, of which he has almost, uh, 200,000 on Twitter alone, to make their content more accessible. That's using your platform in a truly impactful way. Um, this was brought to my attention by Leah Koerner, um, who's constantly sending us stuff, uh, for the podcast and is an access champion in her- her own right. But uh, Karamo, uh, thank you for being an access champion. Um, and we'd love to have you on the podcast in the future.

Philip: Continuing, uh, the conversation from last week and one that's going to be ongoing for who knows how long ... it may go on for as long as the podcast goes on, because I don't know how quickly we're going to, uh, figure this out. Um, but I- I- I have faith that we will. Um, but this conversation on inspiration porn. Katie Keddell reached out, uh, this week with some thoughts. Uh, Katie wears a ton of hats in the DC area, uh, but specifically works as the Access Coordinator at Imagination Stage down in Bethesda, um, and is an artistic ally for Ally Theater, also down in that area.

Katie: My question for everybody is, how do we as advocates and allies articulate what is happening in the world of accessibility to get to funders, get new people on board, um, without leaning into disability of porn. I often find that when people are experiencing accessibility and they can see themselves in the role of savior, they are much more ready to be on board and be excited. But that is at the cost of the person that they are providing access to.

Philip: I think that's an excellent question and thought, Katie. Um, I know during my time at TDF, when I was put in front of a donor, uh, it was really clear that the idea of being a savior to a community was really appealing, uh, to them more often than not. I ... and I knew I had two or three stories, depending on the program, uh, that I could run out that lived in sort of that world. I'm not sure what the answer is there. Um, but let's keep the

conversation going. Let's keep sending your thoughts on the subject. Tweet as us, uh, @AccessChampion, uh, on Twitter. And let's use the hashtag #SolveInspirationPorn. Um, anyone out there in fundraising, I'd really love to hear from you on the subject. Um, and again, let's use that hashtag #SolveInspirationPorn.

Philip: We're debuting a new segment this week called Points to Ponder. Uh, Lew Michaels, who is an access champion in his own right and one of my role models in the field is going to come at us, uh, from time to time, uh, with some thoughts on his mind, uh, having to do with access and inclusion obviously. Uh, and uh, stay tuned after the interview to hear this new segment called Points to Ponder.

Philip: Uh, before we get to the interview, we have just a quick shout out to this week's sponsor. Today's episode is sponsored by Kaiser's Room, uh, hashtag #ImagineWithKaiserCampaign. Kaiser's Room, uh, is a company here in New York City that provides opportunities for imagination and connection for individuals with cognitive and developmental disabilities through theater and dance. Uh, they're currently running a video challenge campaign through the first week of July to help raise money for their programming to make it more affordable, uh, for families, um, in the tri-state area. Uh, check it out at imaginewithkaiser.org or using the hashtag #ImagineWithKaiser.

Philip: Now, without further ado, access champion Michelle Bishop.

Philip: All right. Uh, thanks, Michelle, for joining us on the Access Champions podcast.

Michelle: Oh, thanks so much for having me. I'm so happy to be here.

Philip: First of all, I wanna thank you for ... again, for joining us. But uh, it was really great, um ... this is probably, uh, one of our first really organic guests, uh, I would say, where uh, you know, we discovered, uh, the article you had written about- about voting rights. And then we're lucky enough to now have you on the, uh, on the podcast. So uh, I'm really grateful for that.

Philip: You know, we- we like to start the podcast interviews, uh, with a bit of an origin story to give everyone some context. Uh, you know, one of the things I love is that everyone who works in sort of the field of access and inclusion, uh, all tend to have really unique journeys. Uh, no one is the same for how they ended up in this field and doing this work. Um, so I'd love to hear- hear your journey, how you ended up here.

Michelle: Oh, absolutely. You know, we all have a different journey, don't we? It's fascinating. This is ... For me, working on the disability vote has really been my life's work. It's the only thing I've ever really done. Uh, when I started out in my career, I was a young and optimistic community organizer looking for work, and I ... actually this is a really random story ... had applied for a job doing, uh, some work around employment as a community organizer, and the position had been filled, and ... but it was still up on their website. And they sent the position to a center for independent living, uh, in the area that I was living at the time and said, "I know you guys are looking for a community organizer. I

wanted to send this resume along." And they called me, and it was to do work around the vote in the disability rights community. And as fate would have it, I've always been a huge voting nerd my whole life.

Philip: (laughs)

Michelle: I ... It's super nerdy.

Philip: I'm gonna need a little bit of context for that. (laughs)

Michelle: I- I have context for you. So the day I turned 18, I went to my public library, because this was before there was such a thing as online voter registration. I went to my public library and I picked up the paper voter registration form and I filled it out and I returned it so that I would be a registered voter the day I was eligible. And there were no elections that year.

Philip: (laughs)

Michelle: (laughs) So I- I was just so stoked that I was eligible to vote and I couldn't wait to vote, and I had to make sure I was registered like right away, even though I had like at least a good year, year and a half before I was gonna get to use it. So this has always been me. And so I thought-

Philip: You were the ... possibly the most proactive 18 year old in the history of 18 year olds.

Michelle: (laughs) If we could get all 18 year olds to be this excited about voting, it would just solve so many problems for those of work in the vote. I promise you. Um, but yeah, that was me. And so I said, absolutely. And so I just sort of fell into the disability rights piece of it, although I was a- a movement I was already familiar with, um, and I have a physical disability myself, so it kinda made sense.

Philip: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Michelle: But it was an accident. And then I just ended up here and, um, just really caught a fire for it. So I worked at a center for independent living for a long time doing more, like, ground organizing around the vote. We were building a coalition of disability organizations all over the state that were getting people registered and educating them about their rights and reminding them when the election day is coming up, doing rides to the polls. The whole thing.

Philip: And what state was this in?

Michelle: In Missouri.

Philip: Missouri.

Michelle: Missouri. I lived in St. Louis for a long time. Yeah, yeah. So before I made the leap to DC, I had said, as a good Midwesterner, I said I was never gonna do it. And then here I am. So (laughs) but it's amazing. It- it was ... it took everything to the next level. All the stuff we were doing in the states now I get to look at from a national perspective and help, uh, take those national trends and what's going on kind of across the US and break it down piece by piece for the work that we're still doing on the ground. I just happened to switch networks. I came from a center for independent living and now I work at the National Disability Rights Network, which is a membership association for the protection and advocacy agency. Um, but you know, very similar, very rights-focused work in every state. So um, I've been just extremely lucky. I found something early on in my career that I love doing, and uh, people have been paying me to do it for this long. So I- I- I'm incredibly blessed in that sense.

Philip: For- for those of us who- who- who don't know the day to day of a- a disability advocacy, uh, in- in voting rights, what does an average day look- look for you in- in this world?

Michelle: Every day is different in this work. And that's one of the things that keeps it really exciting. The- the barriers that people with disabilities face are always shifting. To an extent, it's, uh, it's been the same story for a very long time. Uh, the majority of America's polling places have always been acc- ... inaccessible, and they still are. Uh, the last time the US Government Accountability Office looked at this, they found that 40% had no barriers for people with disabilities. So, 60% had at least one barrier.

Philip: Jesus.

Michelle: So to an extent, there are some really longterm problems that probably should've been solved by now that we haven't.

Philip: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Michelle: But the landscape is also always changing. The ... Like I said, online voter registration didn't exist-

Philip: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Michelle: ... when I was 18 and a super nerd and really excited about voting. But now that it does, are those websites accessible? Or are we creating a brand new barrier for people with disabilities, in a system that was designed to break barriers down for people who wanna vote? Uh, polling places themselves are constantly shifting around. They're being moved. They're changing. The people who run elections are changing in the way that they approach the work. It's always different. Building those relationships to make sure that we're working on these solutions together, the types of equipment that we're using to vote, uh, and technology moves so fast. That's a really rapidly changing world.

Michelle: So uh, I always say that access is a moving target because there's no ... there's ... you don't go through once and survey all the polling places and check them all and then say,

"Boom, problem solved. Voting is fully accessible for everyone." It- it's a constantly changing landscape. And so we're constantly, um, moving in that direction. But then everything is sort of shifting under our feet, or wheels, depending on the person. And so it's- it's a constant ... there's a constant fight there, um, to get that work done. I think we've made a lot of progress and I think we're moving in a really good direction. But there's still just so much to be done.

Philip: Absolutely. There always is. When you are addressing sort of individual polling places, do you guys provide trainings? What do you guys provide when you come in to try to help a certain area become more accessible?

Michelle: Well, I think the work is split up into a couple of different major components. Part of it is working with our elections administrators to kind of bring our expertise in disability access to the table. I will tell you, no one knows more about running elections than our elections administrators. Uh, it's a beast of a job and they're amazing at it. Uh, I'm impressed (laughs) with the work that they do every day. And I'm not envious at all. I'm really happy with my piece of the puzzle.

Philip: (laughs)

Michelle: I don't ... I don't know if I wanna be an elections administrator myself. It's really tough. Um, and they ... no one knows more about it than they do. But increasingly, our elections administrators are expected to be experts in so many different things; in how we run elections, in access for people with disabilities, and things like cybersecurity and hacking. And I don't ... There is not a person who's gonna know all those things.

Philip: Yeah.

Michelle: That's- that's a really unrealistic expectation. So for us, it's about saying, you know how to run elections and we know disability, so let's get together and see if we can solve some of these problems. And so we might go out and help survey a polling place and then take a look at are there, you know, some temporary same-day modifications that can be made here to make this work better? Or can we help you find somewhere to relocate it? Can we talk about how we can reconfigure it? You know, there's an accessible entrance over here that we're not using. Is there a path of travel that's gonna get you to that voting booth? It's talking with our elections administrators about the types of equipment that they're using, in terms of actually casting your ballot. What are you thinking about purchasing that voters are gonna see when they go to the polling place? How are they setting up websites that provide information to voters and online voter registration systems? Kind of looking at that, um, end-to-end user process with every point in the system where people with disabilities might interact with the system. And- and are we thinking about how to make it more accessible?

Michelle: And then I would say the other major piece of the work is actually speaking to the voters themselves, helping them to get registered but also making sure that they know what their rights are when they go to vote. So when you go to your polling place, what should you expect to see? How should it be made accessible to you? What accommodations

are you entitled to when you go to vote? So that the voters themselves, uh, are prepared to advocate for themselves and know what to ask for to make sure that the system's gonna work for them. Because I ... you know this. Every person with a disability is different. There are so many different types of disabilities, and then each individual's experience of the same disability could be so different. And so there isn't really a one size fits all solution to how we make voting accessible. Part of it is making sure that we're making really good decisions on how we run our elections and we're providing a good range of options to voters. But then the other piece of that is helping voters think through and make a plan on how am I gonna vote and what do I need to be able to do that successfully.

Michelle: So the work is really broad. Uh, if you went to any one of the PNAs and anyone in the states or territories and ask them what they were working on, you'd probably get a million different answers. It just is, um ... it works best when it's really suited to the context of what's going on in that state, what's going on in that jurisdiction, what does this individual voter need. Um, so the work can be complex, but it keeps it exciting. And that's really, I think, what makes it work and why we've been so successful.

Philip: Amazing. That attention to detail and that individualized approach, um, is incredibly important. The article that- that brought us to you, um, was something that I'll say I was extremely ignorant about. Uh, and I consider myself relatively well versed in- in the field. Uh, but I- I did not know how tenuous the right to vote was, um, specifically for the disability community. Can you talk us through a little bit of what's- what- what is going on and what- what and hopefully what is- is being worked towards in that realm?

Michelle: Well, yes. And I think tenuous is a great word to describe the situation, uh, and I might steal that and use it, so you- you look for that.

Philip: (laughs) It's fine, I'll give it to you.

Michelle: (laughs) The next time you see my name in print, you just ... you go through and search for "tenuous." I might have stolen it. But it- it is. It's a very precarious situation. And you're not alone. I think that the majority of Americans aren't aware that this is something that's happening, um, or how problematic it is. Essentially people with disabilities are the last constituency in the United States that can have their right to vote taken away based on their identify. When people, particularly with mental illness or intellectual disabilities are going to turn 18, and um, and the family is looking at establishing a guardianship or a conservatorship to help that person do, you know, the things that we are normally concerned about when a person with a disability turns 18; making healthcare decisions, managing their finances. Things that we ... two things we could probably all use help with, if we're being honest. I think that people-

Philip: Mm-hmm (affirmative). I mean, I could've used help with that at 18, shoot. (laughs)

Michelle: I just ... I could use help with some of that right now, as a matter of fact. So I think that, uh, that's why people go to have a guardianship established. They're not thinking about voting. They're thinking about those types of practical day to day things. And in that

process, in a number of states, you can be stripped of your right to vote by the judge if the judge decides that you're not competent to cast a ballot. And I think that that's horrifying. Uh, I think that any eligible American should be allowed to vote, and I think that, um, the judgment of competency is so subjective. Who's to say that someone who needs assistance managing their finances doesn't understand what it means to cast a vote or can't make a decision about who they wanna vote for? And quite frankly, I'm sure anyone who's listening right now can think of a ton of non-disabled people who they think make terrible decisions about who they wanna vote for. I don't agree with some of my own family members. But when we don't have a disability, no one challenges us-

Philip: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Michelle: ... on our right to vote. And- and they're not supposed to. Uh, the basis of our entire government taking away someone's right to vote is taking away their entire say on how their, uh, whole lives are gonna be managed. So much of everything we interact with every day is determined by the political process. If you take away someone's right to have a say in that, you're just taking away their- their free agency, their personhood.

Philip: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Michelle: And- and that- that's a big deal. We shouldn't be doing that willy-nilly all over the country. And in the states where this type of thing is allowed, those determinations are made by the individual judges, which means it's not even just what states you live in, but county by county, whether or not this is something the judge does. And some of them never check that box, and some of it ... some of them check it as a matter course for every, uh, guardianship that comes across their desk. Some of them really try to look at them as individuals and make a determination. But what on earth makes us think that our judges are qualified to make a determination about who's competent to vote? I'm not sure what expertise they necessarily have in that.

Philip: So they're not even bringing in experts on that specific disability, say, for uh, maybe someone on the autism spectrum. Uh, they're not bring in an OT or a BCBA or anything like that?

Michelle: Uh, no. I mean, they don't have to. They could. Uh, but they don't have to. That's a determination that's left up to the judge.

Philip: Oh boy.

Michelle: And I think ... Yeah, it's scary, right? And I think it's a really basic misunderstanding of what it means to have a disability. And I think that's how we ended up here. Because you know, non-disabled people sometimes make these decisions and write these rules at the state level and thought, you know, oh yeah if a person has a mental illness or they have an intellectual disability, you know, they have no idea what's going on. They don't know. They can't cast an educated vote. That is a complete misunderstanding of what it means to have a mental disability. That's just not how it works. Um, an-anyone I know

has an intellectual developmental disability can you tell you exactly who they wanna vote for and why. And I can promise you, their reasons are not any better or any worse than anyone else's. I mean, we live in a country where we elect presidents who win the poll for who would you most like to have a beer with.

Philip: (laughs)

Michelle: So you know, (laughs) ...

Philip: Yeah.

Michelle: This- this- this is how we do business as a country. For better or worse, this is where we're at. And so to say that some people, because of the type of disability they have, just can't make an educated decision about who they wanna vote for, um, I think that those are the types of rules that are set up by people who don't know a lot of people with mental disabilities, who don't understand what it is that they're talking about. If you sat down and talked to all these people who are losing or potentially losing their right to vote in this process, these are people who are smart. These are people who ... You know when I said earlier, I think nobody knows elections better than our elections administrators, that's because it's their business. For a person with a disability, no one knows what they need better than they do. No one knows what you need better than you know yourself. And that is the basis of your vote. This is what I need. This is what I want to see happen. Which one of these candidates is telling me that that's a priority for them and how they're gonna do it? And- and that's something that we all really are- are capable of making that determination for ourselves.

Michelle: So taking away someone's right to vote, especially someone who has a guardian, especially someone who, to a greater extent than adults who don't have guardians, is really at the mercy of the system.

Philip: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Michelle: And um, and participating in a lot of these, uh, programs that are determined by the political process cannot have a say. That just seems wrong to me. If you are going to be a part of this system, you should have a say in how the system is run.

Philip: Absolutely. Now if ... for so we ... I know we do have listeners out there, uh, who are individuals with disabilities, and that- that's a- a group of listeners who are continuing to grow. Um, if they encounter a situation like this, or if they're family members of someone who ... or friends with someone who encounters a situation like this, what is the- the- the best first step in- in, uh, looking to regain the- the right to vote?

Michelle: So I would say the first thing you should probably do is talk to your guardian.

Philip: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Michelle: Talk to your guardian. And let's find out first ... There are situations in which, uh, people with disabilities come to us and they say, "I wanna vote but I don't have vote 'cause I have a guardian." And you really need to look at that paperwork because we end up finding out that sometimes the, um ... it depends on the state. You know, if it's only a, uh, partial guardianship, you may not lose the right to vote.

Philip: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Michelle: Or if there's something in the paperwork specifying that you retain it, you may never have lost your right to vote. We really have to look at that paperwork and figure out, did you indeed lose the right to vote? 'Cause it's confusing.

Philip: Oh yeah.

Michelle: And- and there are some cases in which someone says, "Well my mom is my guardian and so I don't have the right to vote and I wanna get it back." And we say, okay, let's take a look at the guardianship paperwork. And we find out mom never went to court and had a guardianship established. You don't actually legally have a guardian (laughs) and you never lost your right to vote, because you are actually your own guardian. It can happen. Um, just you know, "Mom always calls herself my guardian, so we ... you know, that's how we've always talked about it." Uh, that can happen. So you wanna take a look and assess the situation and see, did this person really lose their right to vote?

Michelle: And then I think it's- it's a process that it goes smoother when the guardian is on board.

Philip: Right.

Michelle: If you talk to the guardian, say, "I really wanna be able to vote," and the guardian's in favor of that, then the two of you can go back to the judge together and say, "This is something we both want and think is right." It tends to go a lot smoother. Uh, if there are any glitches, uh, in that process, if you hit any bumps in the road, I would definitely say you wanna get in touch with a protection advocacy agency in your state and talk to them about helping you advocate to get your right to vote back. They're easy to find. If you go to ndrn.org, National Disability Rights Network, ndrn.org, uh, on the right hand side, there's a little map of the United States and you click on it, and it gives you a complete listing of the all the P&As. So if you don't know the one in your state, you can find it and get in touch with them and talk to them about helping you get your right to vote back.

Michelle: I- I encourage everyone, you know, it's not ... it's not the end. Uh, if there's anyone who's listening who has yet to go through the process of having guardian establish, knowing going in that this is something that can happen gives you the opportunity to prevent it, give you and your- your future guardian the chance to say we do not want, uh, this person to lose the right to vote. But if it's already happened, you can get it back. It just might take a little bit of advocating. But it's worth it. To have a say in your government is worth it.

Philip: Absolutely. Um, that's fantastic. Um, and just to reiterate again, uh, for all of our listeners, ndrn.org, uh, is- is where you can find your local, um, agencies.

Philip: Besides obviously this heavy undertaking to- to fix this, this probably that probably should've been fixed a long time ago, what else is going on in the world of voting rights? Uh, what's- what's- what's the current, um, undertakings that are ... that are going on?

Michelle: Well that- that's another big issue. (laughs) Everything- everything in the world of voting right now comes down to the cybersecurity stuff.

Philip: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Michelle: And all these accusations about hacking and it- it's big and it's scary and it's confusing. Uh, there aren't any known demonstrated hacks of voting systems and votes being changed in our election in 2016. I know there's a lot of talk about hacking. The- the only thing we do know happened is that every state has an electronic database where they keep everyone who's registered to vote, and some people tried ... different actors tried to get into those. Um, some of them were foreign hackers and some of them were domestic hackers. But they tried to get into those, and were detected and deterred. So there's a lot of talk about how we're gonna make our elections more secure, and I think that's really important. I think any voter should want to know that our votes are gonna be counted accurately and fairly, and the results are gonna be who the American people actually chose.

Michelle: That said, a lot of the stuff that we're talking about in terms of making our elections more secure can also potentially make them less accessible. The- the big fix right now is to go back to everyone picking up a pen and hand marking a paper ballot. And that's just not something that works for everyone. There are lot of people, different types of disabilities, who just can't do that, not completely independently without any technology to assist them.

Philip: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Michelle: So we're really doing a lot of debating and negotiating right now to talk about how we're going to make our election systems more secure without making them less accessible. We've come so far in the last 10, 15 years. The way ... You know, you used to go to your polling place and you had to pick up that really little, tiny, like thumb tack thing, and use it to- to punch the holes in the punch cards. That thing was terrible. Um, it's not particularly accessible, and it's really difficult for anyone to understand. It's really hard to make sure you've got it lined up right and know that you're hitting the right thing. And we voted that way for a long time.

Philip: And then we end up with a hanging chad-

Michelle: We end up with all of the pregnant chads and hanging chads and all kinds of chads.

Philip: (laughs)

Michelle: Uh, and everyone freaks out. And that's actually a big threat to- to our democracy if we don't trust what happened, we don't trust the process and we don't trust the results. But we lived with that for a long time until the Help America Vote Act came along and was passed, and said that we're gonna make this work for everyone, including making it accessible for people with disabilities. And that's why when you go to your polling place now, there's gonna be like a touch screen.

Philip: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Michelle: And maybe it counts your vote for you directly, or maybe you use the touch screen, it marks the piece of paper for you. But that was something that didn't exist before. We've come a really long way in taking a look at our elections process and making sure it works for everyone. The Help America Vote Act says you have the right to vote privately and independently. And that's really important. Everyone is supposed to be able to go to their polling place or their vote center or early voting or wherever that you're going, and they should be able to mark the ballot. They should be able to verify the ballot, look at it and say, yes, the way this is marked is how I want it to be. And then cast it, whether or not it's sliding it into the ballot or whatever that means. Everyone is supposed to be able to do each of those three things, mark, verify, and cast that ballot, with complete privacy and complete independence.

Michelle: And we're not there yet, but we've come a long way. And the more we talk about going back to those old school ways of voting in the name of making it more secure, the more we threaten to disenfranchise voters with disabilities. So it's a really big deal right now and we're talking about this a lot. And I think we need voters with disabilities paying attention to these issues as well, otherwise we might get some surpr- ... some surprises in our 2018 and 2020 elections when we go to our polling place and how we vote has been changed up, and all those things that made it possible for us to vote privately and independently may have disappeared. So that's the ... we're in the fight of our lives right now, I think, over that. Um, and I hope that everyone is kinda watching these issues and making sure that the people who run their elections know how they feel about it.

Philip: Uh, looking a little bit towards the ... towards the future, uh, what ... uh, obviously we'd- we'd like to see a- a- a completely accessible polling places across the board. Uh, but what- what else would you like to see come- coming down the pike?

Michelle: Oh, wow. So I get a wishlist of whatever I wanna see?

Philip: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Michelle: Ooh, okay. So ...

Philip: If you can't dream on a podcast, where else can you dream? (laughs)

Michelle: I ... That's a great point. Um, so I think I would ultimately like to see us really shake things up and entirely re-think how we run elections. I think so much of the system is based on what made sense a really long time ago when we invented it before

technology changed the way we live our entire lives. Uh, I don't think you should have to register before you go and vote. We have ways- ways of tracking people now and we have ways of knowing, uh, if you're a US citizen without you having to fill out an extra voter registration card. I think you should just be eligible to vote. You know, if you turn 18, you're automatically eligible, without having to take that extra step. I think that that would knock down barriers for a lot of people.

Michelle: Um, I love having a broad range of options for voters. All voters seem to expect that these days, and they really love the new stuff that's coming out. They love early voting and things like that. Uh, they like vote centers. They like the option to vote by mail. But they also ... they all really love going to the neighborhood polling place on election day and getting in line with everyone else and getting your "I voted" sticker. So I think that we should give the people what they want if we want them to vote. I also think that the more options we provide, the more accessible we can make it. Um, for some people, getting a paper ballot mailed to their house and being able to mail it back is what makes it accessible for them. For some people, going to the local neighborhood polling place, you know, at the end of the block and using the, uh, touch screen machine is what makes it accessible. So let's- let's give people a broad range of options so that we can try to make it accessible and user friendly and non-intimidating and not a burden for as many voters as possible.

Michelle: I think there's a lot of really interesting stuff on the horizon with completely changing the way we vote. There are companies right now that are developing ways of voting over the internet. There are companies that have mobile phone apps that you can download and vote on. And they're trying them. The state of West Virginia just used them in their primary as a ... as a pilot project. I think that would be really cool. How amazing would it be?

Philip: That would be great.

Michelle: It would be great, right? If you didn't have to register and you could use your home computer or tablet or phone or whatever it is that you already own. It's set up for you, how you need to be able to interact with it to make it accessible to you.

Philip: And so many of mobile devices are now ... the technology in them have become incredibly accessible. Um-

Michelle: Absolutely. I talk to a lot of people who work in the world of elections and I hold up my phone. I'm doing it right now. You can't see me 'cause it's a podcast.

Philip: (laughs)

Michelle: But right now, I'm holding up an iPhone 8 with a bright yellow case on it. And I hold it up and I say this phone with this tiny little screen is more accessible than most of the voting systems we're using today because Apple thought of new ways of designing it. Right? They invented that thing where you take two fingers and you spread them apart and it makes the screen zoom it, and all of a sudden I can have the text any size I need it to be,

even on this tiny little screen. Uh, most of the voting systems we use right now were invented before tablets and smartphones even existed. If you think about they are 10, 15 years old, uh, and the iPhone 10 just came out. They pre-date ... they pre-date smartphones. So they're- they're just old technology. And I think that the technology we're developing today is gonna change how we interact with everything tomorrow. And I think that at some point, uh, the way we vote is gonna have to kinda catch that wave.

Michelle: We tend to move a little slower in the voting world, and it kinda makes sense. It's because we need it to be secure. Um, I think part of reason more people voted for American Idol back in the day than they did for president was because they could do it from their living room on their phone. And it was just that simple.

Philip: Oh you better believe I- I voted for Justin Guarini from my ... from my living room.

Michelle: Really?

Philip: Oh, I ... He's a Philly boy.

Michelle: Wow, okay. Kelly- Kelly Clarkson for life, but okay.

Philip: (laughs)

Michelle: Um (laughs) ...

Philip: The ... Well it ... Clearly, how things have worked out. (laughs)

Michelle: I'm still team Kelly. Right, she's awesome. So ... But you know, the ... if that was ... I think there's a future in which, you know, you'd be sitting at home watching the debates or you'd see a campaign ad come on and think, "Oh yeah, have I voted yet?" And do it right there.

Philip: Yeah.

Michelle: While you're sitting there. I can imagine that world and I think, um, whether we like it or not, it's coming. And I think it'll just still be a while because we have to make sure we can do it in a way that's secure.

Philip: Yeah, absolutely.

Michelle: You know, that's the big scary stuff. But I think that all those things, they're coming. There's people who are out there who are dreaming all this stuff up, who actually have the tech knowhow to make it happen, unlike me. Um, but it's- it's coming. And I think that the more that voters say what they want from their voting system and they go tell their election official, and then election official, the people who actually spend the money on voting systems, tell the people who make them, who wanna get that money, what is it they ... what it is that they wanna see, the more innovation we're gonna see

happening over time. So you know, be vocal. Be vocal about what you want and what would make it work for you to be able to vote, and I think that we'll start to see those things down the road.

Philip: Amazing. Um, and then finally, uh, you know what I always like to take the opportunity to do is give our guest an opportunity to, uh, kinda spread the love, um, and shine a light on any- anyone else or any other organizations, um, that you think are doing important and- and interesting work. Um, if there's anybody that comes to mind, feel free to give them a little shout out.

Michelle: I would love to do that. All right. I already mentioned them, but I have to do it again because I'm loyal.

Philip: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Michelle: I think that Protection and Advocacy agencies are amazing.

Philip: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Michelle: Check out, um, ndrn.org to find your P&A. They're doing incredible work in the states. Uh, you know, also I used to work for a center for independent living. Centers for independent living I think are just as amazing. Their national association is called NCIL, ncil.org. You should check that out as well.

Michelle: Um, a couple of really cool things that are happening in the world of disability vote that are kinda cutting edge, um, I'm really a big fan of the social media movement called hashtag #CripTheVote, uh, which is kinda like the disability answer to Rock the Vote. Uh, you should check that out, especially if you use Twitter. And if you do, you should follow me, @MichelleVotes, but check out hashtag #CripTheVote.

Michelle: Uh, there is a National Disability Voter Registration Week that's coming up, um, next month. It's gonna be the week of July 16 through the 20th where there will events happening all over the country that are really focused on people with disabilities getting registered to vote and educating themselves about their rights and what to expect when they go to the polls. Uh, a really disability-specific thing, although we have some awesome partners and a lot of local libraries. Just really cool. So that- that you should look for. Uh, it was started by Adapt, but it's being, um, promoted right now by AAPD. If you go to aapd.org, the American Association of People with Disabilities, they're doing some really amazing things with that and with REVUP, um, which stands for Register, Educate, Vote, Use Your Power ... I think that's right. I'm sorry if that's wrong, guys. You're still the best.

Philip: (laughs)

Michelle: Um, the REVUP campaign, (laughs) which is ... which is, uh, bringing more, like, disability get out the vote to your state. Check it out. And they have some really cool swag as well. If you go to aapd.org you can find that.

Michelle: Um, and of course, I'm a big fan of National Voter Registration Day. It's not a disability thing, but it's just really darn important. National Voter Registration Day is the largest single day of voter registration in the United States. It happens annually and it's kinda designed to be, um, right before the, uh, the voter registration deadlines in all the states. So that's coming up. It should be September 25th. That's sounds right to me. I hope ... I hope I didn't get that one wrong either, guys. That would be terrible. Um ... (laughs)

Philip: (laughs) Any- any of these acronyms and/or dates, uh, we ... if they are incorrect, we will have them corrected on all the, uh, all the copies associated with the podcast. Do not worry.

Michelle: Thank you. (laughs) It should be ... I know it's the fourth Tuesday in September, so I believe it be Tuesday, September 25. I'm pretty sure I'm spot about that.

Philip: (laughs)

Michelle: Nationalvoterregistrationday.org. I feel confident about that one.

Michelle: So those are just some of the- the things that I ... and they're really easy to get involved in. If there's just some place you wanna start, something you wanna do, I would take a look at National Voter Registration Day and REVUP and National Disability Voter Registration Week. And um, those have chances for you to get involved and get engaged in your local community.

Philip: Amazing. Well thank you again, Michelle, for- for joining us. Um, and thank you for all of the work, uh, that you do. It's amazing. Um, it- it's important. And hopefully our listeners now have a better idea of- of what still needs to be done, um, and- and can sit back and think about how much, uh, we value our right to work. Thank you again, and thank you for being an access champion.

Michelle: Thank you so much. Thank you for having me. Um, please go check us out, get involved. Everyone, don't forget to vote. Midterm elections this year are a big deal. And I just appreciate the chance to come and talk about it with y'all. Thank you.

Philip: Thanks again to Michelle for coming on the show and for all the work she and the National Center for Disability Rights is doing in the world of voting rights. It's amazingly important work, especially given the current climate.

Philip: Uh, keeping this inclusion train rolling, uh, let's dive into Points to Ponder with Lew Michaels. Lew is currently the Director of Operations for the Shubert Theatre up in New Haven, uh, and previously spent several years at Hartford Stage. I've always appreciated Lew's candid and- and logical thinking. Um, and that's why I wanted to bring his voice to the podcast. So without further ado, Points to Ponder.

Lew: I'm Lew Michaels, and this is Points to Ponder. Parking lots. Accessibility. Do they even go hand in hand? Parking can be a nightmare all by itself, pulling into a parking lot at

your favorite store only to have to loop around. And then when you think you see a spot, it's one of those cart corral things. And let's be honest. That just screams, "Don't push your cart here." Worse than that is when you have to go into full shark mode, as I call it. You know, where you find yourself looping around a parking lot, stalking a spot like it's your prey. Then all of a sudden, you see someone's brake lights, or a person leaving the store. You might sit and wait or slowly roll as you block the rest of the aisle with your blinker on. Bingo! A person opening the trunk. This is it. A good distance from the door, a good sized spot. It's amazing. As you wait there with your blinker on so that everybody knows you've claimed this spot as your own, you begin cursing the person that's about to give you the spot as they unload their child and a cart full of items into the car. You sit there telling other cars that slowly drive by, as you were just doing, "You better not stop. This is my spot." Then after what seems like an eternity, but it's really just seconds, the person backs out and you pull in.

Lew: Wow. That was a lot of work to get one of 200 spots at the store. Imagine what it's like for the person looking for an accessibility spot. Searching for that one of only 10 spots available, they find the van accessible spot they need. So they pull in. But wait. The person who pulled in next to them in that parking spot, you know, the one next to those striped lines, which they thought was some sort of landing zone area for their car. Now the person can open their side door but can't deploy the ramp that they need to get out. It always amuses me that people see the extra space between spots ... again, you know, that striped line area ... and think to themselves, "Oh, this must be where I drop off my car. Right here in the middle." Even though they saw one of those cart corrals when they were circling. But, no. This is where they choose to leave their car, because it's more convenient for them. Convenient for who? Not the person looking to use the accessible spot as it was intended. As they say in the subway system, mind the gap. That extra area around an accessible spot is not a neutral zone where the first one to claim it gets it. It's there so people who need the extra space in the accessible spot have it to use it. So yes, mind the gap. Keep it clear.

Lew: And while I'm at it, accessible parking spaces are not a holding area. It drives me nuts when I pull into a lot and I see a mom or a dad, a husband or a wife, just idling in the nearest accessible spot. No tag. Nothing identifying that they need the spot, which of course, would be fine. But rather, they're just there, idling as they wait for the person inside to run in, grab a bag of Flamin' Hot Cheetos and who knows what else, and come back out.

Lew: And the other I must have missed the memo was the hours that accessible parking spots are accessible parking spots. You see, I thought they were always accessible parking spots. But it appears to me sometimes that at a certain hour, placard or not, they become open to the world and you can just take it. What I'm really talking about here is common courtesy. Courtesy to your fellow man, woman, or child. Surely that can't be too much to ask.

Lew: This has been Lew Michaels with Points to Ponder.

Philip: Thanks, Lew. And uh, if you wanna hear Lew's thoughts on a specific topic, go ahead and tweet at us using the hashtag #MakeLewPonder. L-E-W Ponder. And if you're thinking

about attending the Kennedy Center LEAD Conference this summer in Atlanta that we've plugged on pretty much every episode of this podcast, Lew and I will be presenting on a variety of subjects, um, together, uh, and having a blast. And we've love for you to join us. And I think we're also gonna have Lew do a little bit of guest hosting for the podcast down there. So, uh, gonna be a ton of fun and- and join us, uh, to have an accessible and inclusive time.

Philip: Finally, I just wanna say thanks to our producer, Matt Kerstetter, for making this podcast sound amazing each and every week. Thanks to Eric Walton for that amazing theme song. And thanks to our champion intern, Kelsey Rose Brown. We'll catch in next week. And remember, inclusion believers, never stop running through that brick wall.