

Philip D: Hello Inclusion Believers and welcome to the Access Champions Podcast. I'm your host, Phil Daman for this week's journey into the galaxies of accessibility, diversity and inclusion. Uh, we've got another great episode for you this week, uh, coming to us from Chicago is, uh, Jesse Swanson, who is an associate producer over at the Second City and um, really exciting stuff happening there in the world of sketch and, and improv that, in my heart, will hopefully will spread.

Philip D: Um, but really excited to share, uh, that organization's journey, um, to creating a, a more inclusive environment. I had the pleasure of while I was out there, um, being at their venue, um, for the CCAC social, um, and just really, really fun, uh, event. Um and the venue has, uh, obviously history for them, you know, as a pillar of the Chicago community to take this on and, and, and really move forward in that realm is very, very exciting.

Philip D: A reminder, um, from the last couple weeks, uh, we are taking suggestions for additions to the logo. Um, different types of access and inclusion, different communities that we could possibly be representing in the Access Champions logo, so um, if you have any thoughts, please feel free to hit us up on social media. We're @AccessChampion on Twitter and Instagram and the Access Champion Podcast on Facebook.

Philip D: Um or shoot us an email. Uh, accesschampion@gmail.com and I'll extend that, um, as well to, to any ideas or topics that you guys may want covered, uh, people that you think would make, uh, great guests or organizations that, uh, you think are doing great work, um, that you'd love to hear from, so please don't hesitate to reach out, please don't hesitate to tag us in things or share things with us. You know, we want to be a podcast for the people by the people and I think that's that for, uh, business to take care of this week.

Philip D: Um, later in the month, uh, we will have a guest host, um, taking over for a short period of time. Um, Miss Kelsey Rose Brown will be ... will be stepping in. I am getting married, um, and my fiancée would prefer that I take a little time off to, you know, spend some time with her and and say "I do" and all of that, so um, look forward to, to having her guest host and, uh, keep this podcast rolling.

Philip D: So yeah, so without further adieu, Access Champion Jesse Swanson. All right, and we are here with Jesse Swanson who is an associate producer at the Second City in Chicago. Thanks for taking the time to, to chat with us Jesse.

Jesse Swanson: Thanks so much for having me. I really appreciate it.

Philip D: Um, it's, it's funny that we're connecting now, uh, but uh, I was in, uh, February, um, at your building at the, uh, CCAC social. Um, chatting with a bunch of folks during my short, little jaunt over there. Um, but I'm so happy to chat now, because I just think, um, well one, you, you have a beautiful venue, um, and and two, I think it's so, uh, fascinating, um, how you guys are diving into access.

Jesse Swanson: Yeah, thanks, uh, it's ... the building is actually one of our largest challenges as you may have noticed, right ...

Philip D: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jesse Swanson: ... coming into our space that, uh, Second City is a little bit of a maze ...

Philip D: Uh-huh.

Jesse Swanson: ... and there are no shortage of steps and things like that, right? So, um, so one of our main focuses even in executing events like that is how can we, uh, live in our building with our architecture, but also make it as easily accessible, uh, as possible, so that CCAC function was just, um, one of the ways that we're hoping to delve into the access community here in Chicago.

Jesse Swanson: And, you know, for all intents and purposes we are at what really is the very beginning of our journey.

Philip D: Mm-hmm (affirmative), and and that's a great, uh, starting point. What really prompted, um, the beginning of this journey?

Jesse Swanson: Um, well, I'm a little sad to say that it was a complaint.

Philip D: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jesse Swanson: Right, as as this, as this conversation so often starts, what, what gave us the impetus to really move forward with access at Second City was, was the need, right? And so, we had heard from folks who had attended our venues, uh, you know, attended shows in our venues multiple times that like, "Hey, we would love to be able to see an open-captioned performance. We would love to be able to see an audio-described performance."

Jesse Swanson: Uh, and the thing that distinguishes Second City is, uh, that we are, uh, a for-profit venue, right? So while a lot of these other theaters are able to pursue grant funding for this type of work, that really isn't the case for us, so we had a really interesting challenge in saying, "Cool, we definitely want to meet you, uh, and we definitely want to invite you," uh, but one of the challenges, you know, that we're constantly discussing is how to make that possible, uh, in a, in the for-profit community.

Philip D: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jesse Swanson: So, when we ... so, when we made initial contact with this patron, we said, "Yes, absolutely. We want you to feel invited, we want you to feel as though you can be a part of the Second City, uh, community," and so, we started to reach out and think, "Well, what are our accessibility, um, guidelines? What, what are our processes for providing this type of service?" And as we looked around the

community, we found that so many other theaters were doing such great work in this area and we were woefully behind.

Jesse Swanson: Uh, you know, you look at, you know, Chicago has such an exciting, um, art scene ...

Philip D: Yeah.

Jesse Swanson: ... and accessibility has moved to the forefront in a really exciting way with the, uh, the CCAC, uh, and all of these other organizations that are, that are dedicated to this work, so um, you know, I myself, um, am an artist with a disability and when I was able to get into a position here at Second City where I felt like I had a little bit of, uh, anonymity and a little bit of decision-making power, I said you know, this is, this is a space where we can make a lot of progress.

Jesse Swanson: And I found a, a large number of like-minded individuals in our, uh, in our building who, uh, wanted to help me get there.

Philip D: That's fantastic. I love that. Um, and, and, you know, I, I've spoken to a couple people and I said, "You know what, while yes, the ideal world is, you know, um, the organic nature of access of inclusion happens, because, uh, management or whatever decides from the beginning that that's, um, a thing," but I also think that you know what, sometimes it's, it's not malicious that it wasn't thought of, you know?

Philip D: Um, actually a couple ... when this airs, it'll be a couple weeks ago, but, but Evan and I were talking, Evan Hatfield, that it's not like, uh, some cartoon villain twisting their mustache saying, "I don't want to make things accessible." It's, it's that they're just not thought of and sometimes, that complaint, um, is the perfect prompt to then think about it, which I think is so great, um ...

Jesse Swanson: Yeah, absolutely. And it's one of those things too where, you know, we are ... just as I mentioned earlier, we are in an architectural scenario where many of these things can't be solved 100 percent of the time in the best way possible, but what we found is, what we found is really helpful is simply beginning that dialogue and saying, "How could we help you feel, uh, more, uh, more welcome in our building in any way that we possibly can?"

Jesse Swanson: And just by simply engaging, uh, with some of the most vocal, uh, folks who are giving us these notes about making our space more accessible, more accessible, we've made huge strides.

Philip D: So, tell me a little bit about what you guys are doing right now.

Jesse Swanson: Uh well, we are ... we're a small, but mighty committee, uh, and we have tackled, uh, a couple different things. One of the, one of the first things that we

were able to, um, that we were able to put together, our open-caption performances, uh, which is really exciting for us, because our, uh, to my knowledge, I don't want to speak out of turn here, but to my knowledge, we are one of the only, uh, sketch-and-improv theaters who are successfully, um, doing open-caption performances and, so we started, um, about eight months ago or so when we apply for the TDF Open Caption Training program.

Jesse Swanson: And they were more than happy to come in and work with us and so, we're, we're at about the halfway point now of our two-year partnership with the Theater Development Fund, uh, and working with David Choo at C2, uh, and, uh, Evan over at Steppenwolf. And, uh, really putting on what is essentially our target in 2019 was one, uh, specifically open-captioned or um, audio-described performance a month and that's about where we are now.

Philip D: That's fantastic. And, uh, you know, I love that program. Um, I, I worked at TDF for years and, um, getting to travel for that program for the ... and, and the national, um, autism-friendly training program that they have, um, was always a blast, because you get to help, um, organizations in like really creative and unique ways to create this kind of access.

Philip D: And, and obviously, um, you guys do have that unique hurdle where you are, uh, sketch and, and improvised, um, so it's not the same standard, uh, set up where, um, you know, where David Choo would, you know, load up a script, um, and, uh, you know, be able to, you know, mostly run it like clockwork.

Jesse Swanson: Yeah.

Philip D: Uh, you know, are you guys using a live cart operator?

Jesse Swanson: Yeah, so essentially we, uh, try to ... a couple different models, but what ended up working out for us the best was sort of a hybrid, right? Where we, where we're offering the scripted material, uh, you know, that we give David to upload into his system and then, we are simultaneously, uh, on an AB switch running cart, um, captioning for the improv portions of the show and so far, we've been able to do that pretty seamlessly and David being who he is is of course a perfectionist and so, with, with, with each show, I feel like we are truly, um, you know, uh, streamlining the system, making you know ... minimizing delays as much as humanly possible, uh, and really making sure that those punchlines land at the same time, uh, across the audience, right?

Philip D: Yeah.

Jesse Swanson: Because so much of, so much of comedy is about rhythm and timing that execution of those captions is so, so, so important to make sure that everybody's laughing at the same time and, and the lights go black at the right time and, uh, and it all rhythmically makes sense.

Philip D: Yeah, 1,000 percent. And, and I remember actually the first time David, um, and C2, uh, had to navigate, uh, something not quite the same, but um, switching between the scripted material and improv stuff actually, I think it was here with Hedwig and the Angry Inch, where um, John Cameron Mitchell would, um, you know, change things up occasionally.

Jesse Swanson: Sure.

Philip D: And uh, uh, I remember being there, sat behind, um, Mirabai Knight, who's a cart operator and Katrina Gay, who's a, a great theatrical captioner and watching them flip between the two of them, um, somewhat seamlessly and I'm, I'm sure that the, uh, the model has only improved, because that was probably five years ago, um, at this point, um, but that's really great, um.

Jesse Swanson: Yeah, it's exciting.

Philip D: So, um, now that you ... I mean, I want to say that that is ... those are huge steps, having dedicated performances, um, for both captioning and audio described. What, um, are you hoping for, um, in the near ish future, long-term future, um, really feel free to dream your dreams as I say.

Jesse Swanson: (Laughter)

Jesse Swanson: Sure. Well, I mean, one of things that we, one of the things that we pride ourselves on is this "yes and" mentality, right?

Philip D: Right.

Jesse Swanson: So, my, my whole team, uh, has been super supportive in moving these things forward, um, relatively quickly. I mean, we were doing our, we were doing our very first open-caption show ever, uh, in July of last year and in, and in eight months' time, you know, we've accelerated, uh, the offering, uh, because one, because we're very excited about it and two, we find that the audience is super excited about it.

Jesse Swanson: We're seeing, you know, numbers of folks come into these open-caption and audio-described performances that, uh, that were really truly surprising and, and so heartening for our work. In the future, we are ... we're actually right in the middle of forming our very first, um, advisory board for accessibility programming, so uh, we are more, more or less, uh, toward the tail end of receiving applications for folks who are interested, um, in serving in an, in an advisory capacity, uh, because you know, we really want to be true to that, um, that adage, nothing about us without us and so ...

Philip D: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jesse Swanson: ... and so many folks are excited to be a part of what Second City is and since we're such a multi-faceted business, you know, we have, uh, students in the training center, we have patrons of our, uh, of our, our, uh, comedy here in the building. We have, you know, other satellite institutions in Toronto, in Los Angeles, right?

Philip D: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jesse Swanson: And so, we touch so many people, um, that we have just found a really, um, exciting influx of folks who, uh, who identify as having a disability and want, uh, to have a place at the table in terms of, you know, forming our, our programming moving forward and figuring out how we can do a better job at what we're doing. And we're just really excited about that.

Jesse Swanson: And, uh, and I think, you know, dream of dreams, we're, we're talking about what would it, what would it mean to create an improv or a comedy show that is designed 100 percent, uh, with accessibility at the forefront, 100 percent, right? Taking that ...

Philip D: True inclusion.

Jesse Swanson: ... from the ground up and ... exactly. Rather than, rather than retro fitting product that we already have, ugh, I said product and I don't like it.

Philip D: (Laughter)

Jesse Swanson: Rather than, rather than retro fitting the comedy that we already have to be accessible, what does it mean to, what does it mean to build something truly accessible from the ground up? And um, and you know, that was really inspired by a, um, by one of the open-caption shows that we, that we did, um, a few months ago. We open captioned a show we have here called "She the People," and one of the audience members, uh, we will routinely bring audience members up on stage to participate in a sketch or in an improv, um, game.

Jesse Swanson: And so, in that show, in fact now I'm correcting myself. It wasn't She the People, it was our holiday show, uh, so we invited an audience member up to come, uh, and play on the stage and it wasn't until that audience member reached the stage that we realized that, uh, that he was deaf ...

Philip D: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jesse Swanson: And, and so the game that they had been called up on stage to play was Sound Effects.

Philip D: (Laughter)

Philip D: Uh-huh.

Jesse Swanson: Which, obviously presents, uh, you know, a challenge and, and uh, but because, you know, our improvisers are so quick, um, and they take everything, uh, that they are given on stage as an exciting challenge and an opportunity, right, because that's where that improv training comes in, that uh, after, uh, after initiating the game and taking a few minutes to sort of negotiate that, that initial weirdness that always happens in the area of accessibility, what do you need in order to feel included in this moment?

Jesse Swanson: Um, you know, we were able to get through the game. The audience member got a ton of laughs and as the, um, as the game concluded and he was, you know, gestured back to his seat, the audience was totally on board and you looked out on the house and they were all giving the ASL sign for applause and it was one of those moments where you go, "This is what true accessibility looks like, right?" When an individual can take part 100 percent in an experience, uh, and not allow, uh, any type of disability to be a barrier in participating in that experience and so, that was one of the things that made us go, "Okay, we're, we're moving in the right direction and how do we build something specifically for that person?"

Jesse Swanson: Right, specifically for these groups of people and make them feel like they can have 100 percent of the experience.

Philip D: That's fantastic and that's, that's a, a great goal and I think for lack of a better term, it's just the way it should be. Um, and ...

Jesse Swanson: Yeah.

Philip D: ... and I'm so excited to hear that you guys are as, uh, such, such a pillar of your community not only in Chicago but in, in the world of comedy, sketch comedy and improv, um, to kind of be leading the way, um, in that realm, um, in your field is really, really fantastic.

Jesse Swanson: Yeah, thank you for saying that.

Philip D: Um, well again, thank you so much, uh, Jesse for taking the time out of your very, very busy day, um, to chat with us, um, and uh, I can't wait, uh, on my next trip to Chicago to take in a show at Second City. Uh, hopefully it'll time out where there's a caption performance and, uh, um, as always, uh, thank you for being an Access Champion.

Jesse Swanson: Yeah, thank you so much for having me and if you want, uh, some more information on our programming or accessibility, uh, here at Second City, you know, you can find us, uh, at secondcity.com it's at the bottom there, there's an accessibility link or you can just email us at, uh, access@secondcity.com. We're happy to, happy to talk through.

Philip D: So easy to remember, access@secondcity.com.

Jesse Swanson: Yeah.

Philip D: Love it. Thanks again, Jesse.

Jesse Swanson: Thanks, Philip.

Philip D: Thank you again to Jesse for taking the time to chat. Um, just so exciting what's happening out there and, and so many great things happening in Chicago in the realms of accessibility and inclusion, um, and it's really been a privilege to share, um, so many of those folks and what they're doing with you guys, um, but the Second City specifically, you know, as a, a fan of uh, uh, sketch comedy and have definitely gone to my fair share of improv shows, you know, really exciting to see um, them move forward in this way.

Philip D: Um, if you live in that world of improv and sketch and you want to learn a little bit more about how Second City has accomplished this and continues to move forward, please feel free to reach out to us at accesschampion@gmail.com and we'll connect you guys. Um, really happy to make that connection. Um, and that's that. Uh, thank you as always to our executive producer Matt Kerstetter for making us sound great each and every single week.

Philip D: Uh, our associate producer, Miss Kelsey Rose Brown for everything that she does, Eric Walton for that super dope theme song, Tommy Karr for our logo, which also is a reminder to send us any ideas for additional logos, uh, and we will be back next week. Remember Inclusion Believers to never stop running through that brick wall.