

Philip D.: Hello inclusion believers and welcome to The Access Champions Podcast. I'm your host, Phil Dallmann, for this week's journey into the galaxies of accessibility, diversity, and inclusion. Ah, we got another great episode for you this week. Really, really excited. Um, this one, ah, I put off for a little while because of a slightly, in- a, I felt, an internal conflict of interest. Um, but after, uh, a years plus worth of episodes, I felt like it was finally time, ah, for, ah, Stephane Duret, the founder of Kaiser's Room, the company of which I am the executive director for, ah, to come on and share the story of his journey to creating, ah, inclusive work, um, while doing eight shows a week in heels over at Kinky Boots and, uh, the journey of this company and this organization and, and, you know, the tremendous growth that it's had over the last, uh, couple of years, and, and, and the growing impact, and, ah it's having on, ah, the community here in New York City.

Philip D.: Um, so really happy to share it. I think, ah, obviously I think the world of Stephane. We met, um, a few years back while I was still working at TDF. We had a, a brief meeting as he was sort of diving into all this. As is often the case, I look at liability and I gave him, uh, a couple of notes on what I thought were, were some risky things that were happening. Um, and a year later after I had, uh, left TDF and, uh, he asked to sit down and chat, uh, he had made those adjustments and, and created an even more, um, sustainable, uh, and intentional, uh, programming, um, for the communities. So, um, was so excited to share th- th- you know, these conversations and, and for, you know, someone who I, uh, think is just one of those, uh, outstanding humans here, here in New York, um, doing great work.

Philip D.: Um, a little bit of business to get to. Um, as mentioned last week, we will be at the LEAD Conference in Denver, myself and associate producer, Kelsey Ros-, Miss Kelsey Rose Brown. Um, we're going to be bringing a lot of really fun stuff. Um, last year, we'll call it, you know it was our, our conference pilot, um, and we've been sorting some stuff out over the years, what went right, what went wrong, and, um, how we can do it better. We had a couple of, a little bit of new equipment that we're bringing that'll hopefully, uh, clean up being, uh, in a, in an open and public space and, um, we got some new swag, uh, that we're gonna be bringing and some fun games and, and things, uh, so really, really excited to, uh, to put all, to bring all that out to Denver.

Philip D.: If you're coming to the LEAD Conference, ah, one, get ready for our LEAD Conference preview episode, ah, which will drop the week before the conference. Um, and, uh, make sure to give us a heads up if you're gonna be there and wanna chat or play a game with us. Um, we'll make sure that we're, we're very, very visible but we wanna, um, you know, if we can line some stuff up in advance, ah, obviously we'll be doing our pop-up mini interviews. Um, but I'm, you know, always a fan of doing the, the long form as well.

Philip D.: Speaking of hitting us up, uh, make sure that you're following us on social media. We're @accesschampion on Instagram and Twitter and the Access Champion Podcast on Facebook. Um, we'd love to hear from you, specifically right now. Um, we are evolving our logo. Um, we wanna make sure we're representing as many communities as possible and the communities that we're already, already representing, ah, wanna make sure that we are r- representing them as honestly as possible. Um, and, you know, that includes, you know, we do have the puzzle piece as one of our, our symbols. Um, I've been reading tons and tons of articles on, on, uh, opinions on that, on that as, uh, symbolism. Um, so I do think we're gonna change it, um, and I am putting out there, I'd love, uh, some feedback, some ideas, whatever, uh, you may know of as a, a potential replacement, ah, symbol for there. Um, and, you know, we're looking at the Native community, um, as well, ah, and how we can best represent them.

Philip D.: So if you have any ideas, again, hit us up on social media or shoot us an email at, uh, accesschampion@gmail.com. Um, we are currently interviewing candidates for, uh, two th- sets of things. Ah, first is our champion intern, uh, position. Um, Miss Kelsey Rose Brown joined us last year as our first champion intern and, and, uh, did a tremendous job, but, um, applications are open right now. Um, uh, you can send a resume and a cover letter, uh, outlay- outlining your passion, uh, for accessibility, diversity, and inclusion, uh, as well as your favorite episode of the podcast. Uh, and you can shoot that over to accesschampion@gmail.com.

Philip D.: And then the other thing that we are, are recruiting for and interviewing for, uh, is the Access Champion Podcast board. Um, we are a New York City, New York state non-profit. Ah, and, ah, we are building out our board, which more closely resembles a steering committee. We're looking for, uh, people from a variety of backgrounds, a variety of fields, uh, to help contribute, and, and steer us, and share, uh, their experiences and resources with us as we continue to grow, um, and, and reach, uh, folks worldwide. A whole lot of business there, a whole lot of asks. Um, but, ah, we'd love for you, our listeners, to get more and more involved with the podcast, um, because we are a podcast for the people, by the people. And that's that. So without further ado, Access Champion, Stephane Duret.

Philip D.: All right. And we are here with Stephane Duret, the founder of Kaiser's Room, uh, and, uh, in a very exciting way, this is the first in-person interview in our, uh, studio in Chelsea. So very excited to have that. Uh, thanks for taking the time, uh, Stephane.

Stephane D.: Thanks so much for having me. It's really an honor to be featured on your podcast. Thanks for having me.

Philip D.: Yeah, I mean, we have so many meetings here about Kaiser's Room-

Stephane D.: (laughs)

Philip D.: And all my podcast stuff is just like over on the side and-

Stephane D.: Yeah.

Philip D.: Uh, tonight's to, to f- change it up a little bit.

Stephane D.: I try not to touch it.

Philip D.: (laughs)

Stephane D.: It looks very expensive, but it looks very soft also.

Philip D.: Yeah. (laughs) No, it's good that you-

Stephane D.: [crosstalk 00:06:21].

Philip D.: ... don't touch it. Uh, (laughs)-

Stephane D.: I try. I've learned.

Philip D.: (laughing) Um, so, you know, I obviously, uh, I know this story very well because it is, uh, partly my job to recount it to board members, donors, et cetera.

Stephane D.: Yes.

Philip D.: Um, but I'd love for you to share, uh, this really fascinating journey that you took, uh, into entering the world of, of inclusion.

Stephane D.: Absolutely. Um, so I am a trained actor. I went to school in Chicago, Illinois. I went to Roosevelt University, which is the Chicago College of Performing Arts at Roosevelt University for Musical Theatre. And upon graduating, I, like any other actor, was looking for work and I found a job ... one of the highest paying jobs that I had at that time as an actor was doing a show called Red Kite Round Up with the Chicago Children's Theatre. And this was a show where a maximum of eight actors took a maximum of ten students who were on the Autism spectrum on an imaginary, uh ... I just blanked on the word. It's a camping trip.

Philip D.: Okay.

Stephane D.: And, um, it was, hands down, the most riveting experience that I had in the theater. Um, I had never felt such connection and I had never felt so important-

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: ... as a performer before that moment. Um, I didn't know I w- what I was getting into. I didn't know anything about Autism. But once we started, the director and the Autism specialist, they kept saying, "Once you're in the room, you'll know what to do." They were, we were prepped. We were well rehearsed-

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: ... and trained. Um, but we were also very nervous. And like clockwork, just as they said, once the students showed up, we knew exactly what to do and why to do it,

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: ... and how to do it. And it became beautiful. Um, so from there, I moved to New York City and was teaching dance. And one of the girls I was teaching with was working with a little boy who had Autism-

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: ... named Kaiser. Shout out to Kaiser. And uh, they were looking for boys to be a part of his Son-Rise Program.

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: Parent-run Son-Rise program.

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: So, we were just chit chatting, her and I, one day before class started. And I told her that that was the thing that I experienced working with the Autism community in Chicago and she was like ... light bulb went off and she was like, "I think you should meet these people and maybe do what I do with this little boy as well."

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: And I worked for about two and a half years with Kaiser.

Philip D.: And for those who, who d- don't know, uh, in a couple senses, what is the Son-Rise Program?

Stephane D.: So the Son-Rise Program is, um, early intervention for individuals with Autism.

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: So your child is born. You, they're probably diagnosed. You, they start to show signs-

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: ... about maybe not connecting as a neurotypical child would.

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: So you get them tested and once you see that there is a difference there in the firing of brain synapses, and sensory intake, and regulation, then you try to do something about it.

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: Of course, as any parent would. Um, so the Son-Rise Program is basically where you meet your child wherever they are and this is parent-run-

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: ... and normally with volunteers.

Philip D.: Okay.

Stephane D.: So the child stays in a safe environment for up to eight hours a day.

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: And there's a Rolodex or a revolving door of individuals that come and connect with your child. And the main goal is to, to build that connection first-

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: ... and then to build upon it.

Philip D.: Okay.

Stephane D.: So you join them until you get what's called the green light. Normally they give you eye contact or, or some sort of conne- make some sort of connection with you-

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: ... and then you build on that.

Philip D.: Great.

Stephane D.: Um ...

Philip D.: So you were doing that for, for over a year-

Stephane D.: I-

Philip D.: ... or two years.

Stephane D.: I did that for maybe about two and a half years. I, I would leave for a little bit to do a show, um-

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: ... and I would always come back because it was fulfilling work and, and watching this boy grow into development and into connectivity, I thought, was really, really beautiful. So, so it, it really moved me.

Philip D.: Mmm.

Stephane D.: And, um, Kaiser's mother actually mentioned that performers are the best people to do this work because of the affect on their face-

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: ... and because of the creativity, because of that improv nature, that "Yes, and" nature where we can build anything out of anything and whatever we create is what we create, so long as we're building a connection and working on being with each other and sharing with each other.

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: Um, cut to a couple years after that, I was doing a show at the Public Theater.

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: I was the swing for Fortunes of Solitude.

Philip D.: Hey now.

Stephane D.: I love that show. I love that theater. I loved everything about it. And one day after rehearsal, between rehearsal and the show, I was just feeling inspired.

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: And I was like, "What I would love to do is that work that I did in Chicago, during the day, at the Public Theater, while performing off Broadway at night."

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: That was my goal.

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: I called, uh, Red Kite, and I was like, "Hey, can you guys open up a branch? I would love to run a New York branch of what you guys do." And they candidly were like, "We've tried it before. It didn't really work so well. We don't have the manpower that we need-"

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: ... remotely to make that successful. Um, but you have our support in whatever you want to do with what you learn from us."

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: So I was on the phone with my mom griping-

Philip D.: (laughs)

Stephane D.: ... upset.

Philip D.: Like you do.

Stephane D.: Like you do. You know, "How come my dreams aren't coming true, Mom? What do I do?"

Philip D.: (laughs)

Stephane D.: My mom said, "Well if, you know, you can't bring Red Kite to New York, then why don't just start your own Red Kite in New York?" And that's what I did.

Philip D.: Wise words from a, from a mom.

Stephane D.: Mama Duret.

Philip D.: They tend to, they tend to have them.

Stephane D.: (laughs)

Philip D.: Ah, so, you know, it's, it's not a- as easy as just snapping your fingers and you have a non-profit.

Stephane D.: No.

Philip D.: Uh, so, uh, if, tell us a little bit about that, that, you know, you go from ideas/advice from, from mom, uh, to fully formed operating non-profit service organization.

Stephane D.: Well I've always had the support from my mother.

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: And I've always had the drive of my father.

Philip D.: Okay.

Stephane D.: My father's the type of man who we- has these ideas. He's the dreamer.

Philip D.: Okay.

Stephane D.: That's where I get my dreaming from. The, the most random ideas, like my father started doing research one on, once on wineries.

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: He doesn't even drink alcohol.

Philip D.: (laughs)

Stephane D.: So this sudden interest in wine, I have no idea where it came from, but he was steadfast and doing research on how to grow grapes in Haiti, in warm climate. I'm just like, "We can't grow grapes in Haiti."

Philip D.: (laughs)

Stephane D.: But he was steadfast on figuring out how and why he could or could not. And, and I kinda got a little bit of that from him as well.

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: So I had this idea planted by Mom, the supporter.

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: I was like, "Oh, I'm gonna start my own Red Kite-"

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: "... in New York. So what is that gonna look like? Oh, well I think that the government and the city and the state should, you know, help financially, so this is gonna be a non-profit organization so that we can get charity grants and things like that, as opposed to just having to raise the funds myself." So that's why I decided non-profit route.

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: And, and then I just started Googling.

Philip D.: (laughing) Isn't it, isn't that beautiful? The, the internet is there. Google is there for you.

Stephane D.: That is right. That is right.

Philip D.: I love it so much. Ah, and, and, uh, to be candid, that is a conversation you and I have had many times-

Stephane D.: Yes.

Philip D.: ... when, uh, different-

Stephane D.: (laughs)

Philip D.: ... different paperwork is either done in an interesting way or, or-

Stephane D.: Thank you. Interesting.

Philip D.: ... maybe, yeah. (laughs) Uh, and then I just go, "How did you do this?" "Google." Um-

Stephane D.: I just Googled it.

Philip D.: Yeah. I mean, you're not, not wrong for that. It's a, a tremendous resource and there's a lot out there in how to start a non-profit, ah.

Stephane D.: Yeah.

Philip D.: So, you start this, you start this organization. You, you file most of the appropriate, ah-

Stephane D.: (laughing)

Philip D.: ... most of the appropriate paperwork.

Stephane D.: Or tried to at least. (laughs)

Philip D.: Um, and, uh, where, where, where's the launch point? What is, what do you guys start ... What do you start with?

Stephane D.: Uh, what I ... So, the idea for me was centered around the performance-

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: ... the multisensory, interactive show-

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: ... that was specifically derived for this community.

Philip D.: Okay.

Stephane D.: So in my mind, that was all I was going to do.

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: So I am a company member at the Cell Theatre. Shout out to the Cell Theatre on 23rd and 8th. Um, they actually ... Once I had this idea that this is what I wanted to do, I went to the Cell Theatre where I had worked previously, and I said, "This is the thing I wanna do. I wanna do Red Kite, but here in New York." The artistic director, Kira Simring, said, "That's so crazy. I worked with a company that did the same thing in California called Red Ladder."

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: So there seems to be a red theme-

Philip D.: (laughs)

Stephane D.: ... going on in the theatrical Autism world. Um-

Philip D.: And, I'm ah, I'm gonna pause you there for a second 'cause I have a, a funny story about red.

Stephane D.: Uh-huh (affirmative).

Philip D.: Um, so a, um, we'll say a previous, uh, colleague of mine, uh, when they were launching a program for this community, uh, had bought a ton of things, um, that were colored red-

Stephane D.: Uh-huh (affirmative).

Philip D.: ... uh, to be given out. And somehow, some way, they ended up on some website-

Stephane D.: Oh boy.

Philip D.: ... that, uh, said that the color red was a trigger.

Stephane D.: Oh.

Philip D.: And, uh, they came back and said, "We have to get rid of all these red things." And I just remember turning to them and just going, "Someone with Autism is not a bull."

Stephane D.: (laughing) It's just a color.

Philip D.: It's just a color. Now is it an inciting color? Yes, potentially, whatever-

Stephane D.: Could be.

Philip D.: But I was like-

Stephane D.: Depends on the individual [crosstalk 00:16:29].

Philip D.: I was like, "We're not a, it's not a cartoon bull."

Stephane D.: Right. (laughing) We aren't matadors.

Philip D.: Yeah.

Stephane D.: This should be fine.

Philip D.: Oh my God.

Stephane D.: Oh, blessed.

Philip D.: Anyway. Uh, so Cell Theatre-

Stephane D.: Yes.

Philip D.: Red Ladder.

Stephane D.: Yes.

Philip D.: Okay.

Stephane D.: Um, so they said, "We would like to house this."

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: "Um, we wanna get you guys on the fee- on your feet. So what can we do to help?" So they actually helped produce our very first show, Treasure in NYC-

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: ... which was written by Laura Kleinbaum and Rona Siddiqui. Um, this really, really great show that was 45 minutes long, interactive, multisensory, where we visited a couple of spots in New York City. So the premise of the show is it's a treasure hunt through New York City. So we went to the reptile house, we met a couple of reptiles, got a clue, took it to the Empire State Building. Ultimately, we, we end at Coney Island, where we find our treasure and everybody goes home happy, after singing lots of lovely songs and dancing in really great ways.

Philip D.: (laughs)

Stephane D.: Um, so that was kind of where that started.

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: Um, from that launch point, I started having conversations with people in the community, with parents, with, you know, Kaiser's mother, with anybody that Kaiser's mother would connect me with, with, um, with any of the connections that I could make from those connections. I started talking to people at schools.

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: And what I learned w- That was all kind of in a way to do outreach, to get butts in seats, basically.

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: And the more I communicated with these ... the community, the more I realized that they have a lot less than just these shows. They, they don't have the opportunity to have dance classes like some of us have had growing up. They

didn't have acting classes or music classes because they're stuck going to OT or, you know, speech, or any other form of therapy.

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: Um, or they're overwhelmed because of the entire day that they had at school, so they need to go home and crash for a little bit, whatever it may be. So I thought, "Why not give them that? I'm equipped."

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: "We, I've got the teaching artists. We're already trained up. Let's send these teaching artists into the schools and see if we can teach the arts and give, give a little respite to these students that are going through a lot on a day-to-day.

Philip D.: So these classes, um, are not your, your standard theater or dance class.

Stephane D.: Yeah.

Philip D.: You have other objection- objectives, not objections.

Stephane D.: Yes.

Philip D.: Objectives-

Stephane D.: (laughs)

Philip D.: ... in these classes.

Stephane D.: Yes. Um, it's all about connectivity.

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: Uh, again, going back to the work that I did with Kaiser in the playroom, it was a world of yes.

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: The room was already distraction-free and a safe domain-

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: ... where he felt safe. And that's actually where the name comes from. Kaiser's Room is ... I want to create this space where you feel comfortable enough to come out of your shell and connect with me.

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: Because a lot of our society, a lot of our world, has us do the opposite.

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: You fit into this mold, you have to do this this way, you walk on the ro- right side of the street as opposed to the left. And it drives me crazy as a New Yorker-

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: ... when people are walking on the wrong side of the street.

Philip D.: (laughs)

Stephane D.: I can't understand why we can't walk on the same side of the street.

Philip D.: Yeah, I always say, "New York doesn't have highways. We have sidewalks." Let's ... You wouldn't stop in the middle of a highway.

Stephane D.: You wouldn't.

Philip D.: You wouldn't drive on the wrong side of the road.

Stephane D.: You wouldn't.

Philip D.: So-

Stephane D.: So we should-

Philip D.: So let's get it together. (laughs)

Stephane D.: ... follow the rules of the road on the sidewalk.

Philip D.: I think everyone should have to, like, sign a pamphlet if they come to visit.

Stephane D.: I agree.

Philip D.: Uh, I mean-

Stephane D.: We should have walking licenses.

Philip D.: (laughs) Trying not to sound like a bitter New Yorker here but-

Stephane D.: (laughing) We get it. You're in good company. Um, so what we offer in Kaiser's Room is the opposite of that-

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: ... where you can drive up the left side of the road or stop in the middle of the road if you need to. Um, because we can do that. You know, somebody who maybe doesn't have the brain function-

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: ... it's a little bit more difficult for them. Or does have the brain function but it's physically agonizing.

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: Well, why not, let's, let's break that cycle and let's give you something that, that can actually help reset your sensory intake and your regulation.

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: Um, so that's, that's what we offer, connectivity. Um, imaginative play-

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: ... is also proven to be very beneficial for this demographic and for this community. So, so why not doing it while having a good time?

Philip D.: And, uh, one of the things I, I, I do love about the organization is that, uh, oftentimes with this kind of programming, uh ... just a little bit of street noise going on here in New York. I don't know if we're picking it up.

Stephane D.: (laughs)

Philip D.: I'm hoping not. Doesn't quite sound like we are, but, you know, who knows? Um, but with the, the, with this organization, a lot of times, um, programs like this are very child-focused. Um, so tell me a little bit about sort of how, uh, Kaiser's Room, or KR as we refer to it internally-

Stephane D.: Yes.

Philip D.: ... um, is serving a, the larger sections of the community.

Stephane D.: Yes, well we, we started off focusing on children.

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: And again, with more conversations, I learned that there's a drop off point.

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: When these individuals turn 21 and age out of the school system, there's no- there's no longer any programming for them. Um, so there's an amazing organization called SNACK on the Upper East Side and, and it's Jackie who started it, started it for her son, Joey.

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: And he, if I'm not mistaken, uh, kept being released from programming.

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: So Jackie was like, "What am I gonna do? I'm gonna start my own." So she started one from ages, I think, 5-10.

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: And then Joey turned 11. "Uh-oh, what am I gonna do? Start new programming for 10-15 year olds."

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: Joey turned 16. "What am I gonna do? Create new programming." So in my mind, she really pioneered this approach of, of offering something to this older demographic. Um, and actually, when we took Treasures in NYC to SNACK for one of their holiday programs, she pulled me aside afterwards and was like, "I had n-" She told me, in quotes, "I've never seen so many people, at so many different levels, at so many different ages, engaged for such a long time."

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: The show's 45 minutes and for the entire 45 minutes ... The youngest person in the group was seven. The oldest was 22.

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: All on various levels of the spectrum. And they all had a blast in our show. So that was when I realized this is universal.

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: This isn't just for children.

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: And we also take a very individualized approach. The class that we teach is very much geared towards the students in the classroom.

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: So if you're 22 and sports is your thing, then we can have a dance class centered around sports.

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: And we're doing dance movements while catching a ball. That's a passe. The, w- the Heisman Trophy. Is that what it's called?

Philip D.: Yeah. The, yeah, the Heisman.

Stephane D.: Uh-huh (affirmative).

Philip D.: The Heisman move. It's a [Fosse 00:23:56] move. Yeah.

Stephane D.: It's, that's, that's a passe, is what that's called in the dance world.

Philip D.: Oh, okay.

Stephane D.: Yeah.

Philip D.: Oh, I'm gonna, I'm gonna bring that back home and, and drop that with my wife and then feel very smart. (laughs)

Stephane D.: Yes. That amazing wife of yours, the Kaiser's Room teaching artist.

Philip D.: Yes. Uh, she, like in full disclosure, uh, does teach-

Stephane D.: (laughs)

Philip D.: ... the, uh, 21 plus class at SNACK, uh, a dance class there, and um, I actually, uh, was going to reference, uh, another class that she taught for, for Kaiser's Room, uh, where I saw her turn, um, a dance class into being focused on Spider Man.

Stephane D.: Yup.

Philip D.: Um, because that was the focus of multiple individuals in that class-

Stephane D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Philip D.: ... was Spider Man. So, um, to see my wife, who, who definitely doesn't love all of the super her- hero paraphernalia-

Stephane D.: (laughs)

Philip D.: ... in our, in our home, uh, just dive in, uh, because she, she loves, uh, connecting and imagining-

Stephane D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Philip D.: ... uh, with, with that, uh, was tremendous, so ...

Stephane D.: Right.

Philip D.: (laughs)

Stephane D.: And again, like what a perfect way to build a connection and to take this individual's motivation-

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: ... and use that to connect with them.

Philip D.: Absolutely. Um, so currently, w- you know, where is, uh ... again, full disclosure, we just had our annual board meeting. (laughs)

Stephane D.: We did. Thank you for that board meeting, Phil. Phil is really, really impressive.

Philip D.: Um, aw shucks. Ah-

Stephane D.: You've done some really, really amazing work for the organization, have steered us in a beautiful direction. So thank you.

Philip D.: Oh, you're very welcome. Uh, it is a, a passion project of mine. Um, and, uh, the organization has experienced tremendous growth over the last 15 months.

Stephane D.: Yes.

Philip D.: Um, I feel like I'm repeating myself from the board meeting.

Stephane D.: (laughing)

Philip D.: But it, it, uh, it has. And, and, uh, I think, eh, and you can speak to this better than I can, you know, where is the organization right now?

Stephane D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative). So right now, we are growing beautifully. Uh, we've got quite a few partnerships that are in the works where we are trying to identify more communities to tap into and be a part of and, and to continue c- creating the space and offering these opportunities to these individuals. So, ah, we have a couple of beautiful partnerships that are coming up-

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: ... with AHRC, with HeartShare.

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: We are hoping to expand into a couple of other schools.

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: Um, we are already at ... let's see, one, two, three schools.

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: Uh, we're hoping to join some day hab programs and maybe be at an, maybe two more schools-

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: ... in the fall and/or spring. Um, we are starting a p- beautiful partnership with another company to hopefully start bridging a couple of gaps.

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: Because there are people with Autism that have quite a few other disabilities as well.

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: So we're trying to find different ways to communicate with that niche demographic.

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: So we're trying to pull partnerships from various places and, and offer-

- Philip D.: Yeah, one of the more organic ones, um, with a, with an organization here in the city was really great, came through, uh, one of our board members, um ... shout out Michelle Veyvoda, um, who i- is an associate professor up at Iona who really, uh, brought back to my, my attention initially, um, the overlap in the deaf community, um, with individuals who identify as deaf but also have additional, ah, disabilities. Um, and that's a very exciting thing for me-
- Stephane D.: Right.
- Philip D.: ... um, specifically coming from sort of a larger inclusion access background. Um, and, ah, hopefully, uh, as that, that partnership is, is, uh, being ironed out and-
- Stephane D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).
- Philip D.: ... um, you know, there's thoughtful meetings, uh, and, and that's one of the things I want to share is, um, with this organization, an- and many of the organizations we have, uh, I say, sister organizations in the city.
- Stephane D.: Oh yeah.
- Philip D.: Uh, a couple who have been highlighted on the podcast before, with ActionPlay a few weeks ago-
- Stephane D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).
- Philip D.: ... um, and CO/LAB, one of our very first episodes. Um, these organizations are very, very thoughtful in how they serve the community and making sure that they're involving the community in creating, um, the ways that they serve them. So-
- Stephane D.: Yes.
- Philip D.: You know, starting there, um, and, and that's one of the things Kaiser's Room does so well, um, specifically in this instance, taking the time to look at the curriculum and seeing, you know, what works, what doesn't work, when moving to this other demographic within the community, um, that we have been serving for, for however many years.
- Stephane D.: Right.
- Philip D.: Um, you know, learning things, like creating a vernacular in the first, um-
- Stephane D.: Couple of classes.
- Philip D.: ... c- first couple classes.

Stephane D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Philip D.: But also then thinking, you know, while that serves this specific demographic, um, within the community, it is also applicable to the rest of the community in a lot of ways-

Stephane D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Philip D.: ... and something that we can integrate, um, throughout and, and as a tool to the teaching artists and other things.

Stephane D.: Absolutely.

Philip D.: Um, which, you know, speaking of our teachers, that, the artists community is some, is a group that's very important to you as well.

Stephane D.: Yes. Very much so. Uh, my brother ... and my brothers and sisters, if you will, um, a lot of what moved me to this work was, as a sensitive artist myself, it was tremendously fulfilling to be able to give back with something that I'm so passionate about.

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: And the more time I spend in this industry, the more people I've encountered that have these big, beautiful hearts that want to give back and sometimes you hear ... not sometimes. All the time-

Philip D.: (laughs)

Stephane D.: You hear a lot of, "No,"-

Philip D.: Yeah. (laughs)

Stephane D.: ... in this industry. Um, I, you know, having just finished my show, and-

Philip D.: To be clear, you had spent how many years in, in Kinky Boots?

Stephane D.: I spent two and a half years in Kinky Boots.

Philip D.: So two and a half years, eight shows a week, in heels-

Stephane D.: (laughs)

Philip D.: ... while also forming and growing a non-profit inclusion based organization.

Stephane D.: (laughs)

Philip D.: Just giving some context out there.

Stephane D.: Yeah, there's, yeah, doing a couple things. Been doing a few things.

Philip D.: Just a little inclusion in heels.

Stephane D.: All of the things.

Philip D.: No big deal.

Stephane D.: Yeah. Inclusion in heels. Absolutely.

Philip D.: (laughs)

Stephane D.: You should see me teach a workshop in those heels. Um, probably to this demographic.

Philip D.: Yeah.

Stephane D.: I, I wouldn't put it past myself.

Philip D.: Yeah.

Stephane D.: Um-

Philip D.: (laughs)

Stephane D.: But I'm recently back on the audition circuit, and auditioning my butt off and, and every couple of days it's another, "No." Um, that can be tremendously taxing emotionally on an artist.

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: So to be able to, you know, check all that stuff at the door-

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: Well, first of all, you have to know your stuff.

Philip D.: Yup.

Stephane D.: Because if working with this demographic teaches you anything, it teaches you your weaknesses and what your sensory intake and regulation is.

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: Because you have to be regulated in order to be in a classroom, and present, and efficient a- or effective with this demographic.

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: So that's one of the things we give our teaching artists in our training programming-

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: ... is this better sense of self, so that you can really put your stuff aside and really be there and present for someone else. Um-

Philip D.: And we have a, a tremendous, uh, growing family of teaching artists.

Stephane D.: Yes.

Philip D.: Uh, some of the most-

Stephane D.: Such beautiful, open people.

Philip D.: And incredibly talented and-

Stephane D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Philip D.: ... and, um, I used this word a bunch earlier this week ... warm.

Stephane D.: Yes.

Philip D.: Ah, just warm humans. Um, so i- i- it is a true pleasure to, to interact with our, our teaching artists.

Stephane D.: Yeah.

Philip D.: Um, that's absolutely wonderful. Uh, all of this is wonderful-

Stephane D.: (laughs)

Philip D.: And all the things that I, I kind of knew, but it's always nice to hear it from you. (laughing) Ah, but, um, I, I'd love to ... And, and, and again, candidly, uh, we do have an internal policy where I do let Stephane dream his dreams.

Stephane D.: Yes.

Philip D.: And I, I never say no-

Stephane D.: [crosstalk 00:31:47].

Philip D.: I, I say, "Not right now."

Stephane D.: (laughs)

Philip D.: Ah, ah, but, uh, ah, you know, I have my little Google Doc internally that is-

Stephane D.: Yes.

Philip D.: ... Stephane's dreams.

Stephane D.: Yup.

Philip D.: Um, but I'd love for you to share some of these dreams-

Stephane D.: Yeah.

Philip D.: ... for the future of KR and the future of, ah, inclusion as a whole.

Stephane D.: Yes. I, uh, so my big dream for KR ... and I've always been calling it a megaplex.

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative). (laughs)

Stephane D.: That's what I want it to be. I want a megaplex. Um, I want there to be classrooms and a performance base or two on the first floor.

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: And then I want the second floor to be devoted to respite for the rest of the family.

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: Because as I started doing this work, work, and I s- as I started communicating with more of the community-

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: ... I learned that a lot of these parents are operating at PTSD-level stress ...

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: Just by living. Just by having a child. Put yourself in a position where you don't know what might happen at any given point in time, uh, especially if you're dealing with your child being non-verbal.

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: May be larger than you.

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: Maybe has triggers that we don't know yet. Maybe they ate something that they weren't supposed to eat, something that's completely deregulated them. You are on pins and needles at all times. And that's just you in the privacy of your own home.

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: Now picture taking this individual out into public, out on the street, on the subway.

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: So not only are you concerned for-

Philip D.: Yeah. New York, not the most sensory friendly place on earth.

Stephane D.: Not the most sensory friendly (laughs) place in the wo- at all.

Philip D.: (laughs)

Stephane D.: Um, so, so one of the things that I heard often, Faith Clarke, my dearest Faith ... She talks about her child and not, not only being concerned or thinking about her child, but also having to think about everyone around them.

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: You know, what if I actually worked one on one with another little boy who was pretty violent-

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: ... and he could hit random strangers for no reason.

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: Or like spit. He definitely like licked the subway pole once while we were on the subway together.

Philip D.: I've seen neurotypical kids do that, ah-

Stephane D.: Yeah. (laughs)

Philip D.: And I just go, "Well, it was nice having you in the world."

Stephane D.: Right.

Philip D.: "I really hope your parents aren't anti-vaxxers."

Stephane D.: (laughs)

Philip D.: So ... (laughs)

Stephane D.: I hope, I hope you make it past-

Philip D.: Yeah. (laughs)

Stephane D.: ... the Gangrene you inevitably have on your tongue. Um, but it's, and it's, the things that you don't think about are the eyes that are watching you-

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: ... as this child is having a meltdown in a Whole Foods, trying to free the fish that are already dead and on ice.

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: And I literally had to tackle this individual onto the ground and whisper in his ear, "It's okay. I know. I'm sorry. There's nothing we can do about it now. All we can do is walk in the other direction." People are looking at me like I'm either assaulting this child-

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: ... or that this child needs to get a grip, or he needs to grow up, or you need to be a better child. None of this helps-

Philip D.: No.

Stephane D.: ... the individual and it surely does not help the person that's with them.

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: So, back to my megaplex ...

Philip D.: (laughs)

Stephane D.: I would like to offer a crying room or, you know, soundscape room where they can just, like, spend while we've got your child, your, your child-

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: ... in our class or during a show. You can get your nails done or like get a little massage-

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: ... get a facial, talk to a financial advisor or an insurance broker-

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: ... or somebody that we would, of course, screen, so that you can get all the help that you need.

Philip D.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Stephane D.: Um, so I keep calling it a megaplex but it might be a community center.

Philip D.: Yeah, I think that's a little more non-profit.

Stephane D.: That's kind of what it sounds like, right?

Philip D.: (laughing) Megaplex feels like a, a m- a movie theater. (laughs)

Stephane D.: A movie theater. It does. It does. Yeah. A community center.

Philip D.: Oh, well-

Stephane D.: Yeah.

Philip D.: I, uh, I fully support that dream-

Stephane D.: (laughs)

Philip D.: ... as you, as you know.

Stephane D.: Yes.

Philip D.: Um-

Stephane D.: Certainly.

Philip D.: And, uh, and I'm, i- incredibly thankful for all the work you- you've done. You, uh, your organization, and your mission, and your vision, um, you know ... it's become a passion of mine as well and, and, ah, the impact that I've seen it make in this community here is absolutely tremendous. So thank you.

Stephane D.: Amazing. Thank you.

Philip D.: And of, as always, thank you for being an Access Champion.

Philip D.: Uh, thanks again to Stephane for taking the time, uh, to chat. Uh, it was great to do our first, uh, in person, uh, interview here in our studio in Chelsea. Um, we've done a ton of phone interviews here but that was our first in-person one. It was a blast. Um, highlighted, uh, you know, I had a, a, a s- pilot ... we'll call it a pilot ... piece of equipment, just trying it out, uh, and, and so, uh, I loved it and, and, uh, we're gonna get a few more before we, uh, hit the road this summer, uh, which again, is a reminder. We will be in Denver in August at the Kennedy Center LEAD Conference. If you're coming, let us know. And uh, if you are, are also going, uh, get ready for our, uh, LEAD, our second annual LEAD preview episode, which will hit, uh, the week before the conference.

Philip D.: As always, thank you to our executive producer, Matt Kerstetter, uh, for making this sound great each and every single week. Uh, thank you to our associate producer, Miss Kelsey Rose Brown, uh, for all of the work that she does. Um, a reminder that we are reaching out, uh, and accepting applications for both our champion intern position, ah, and for, uh, the Access Champion Podcast board, which, uh, more closely resembles a steering committee. Um, thank you to Eric Walton for that dope theme song and Tommy Carr for our continuing-to-evolve logo. Hint, hint, hit, hit us up, let us know, uh, what communities we could be representing, uh, in addition to who we're already representing. Ah, we will back again next week, and remember inclusion believers, never stop running through that brick wall.