

Phil Dallmann: 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. Uh, we got another great episode for you this week. Uh, we are joined by Deja Cabrera, who is the Transgender Services Coordinator out at the San Diego LGBT Community Center. She's doing such, uh, tremendous work out there, um, and uh, in the way with Project Trans and- and creating tremendous support, um, as well as being a- a dope performer in her, in her own right.

Phil Dallmann: Um, so, uh, really excited to share that conversations. Um, you know, she is a- an organic guest, which I really, uh, I'm always so excited about, and that she came to us. Um, we put out a little ask, or I- I put out a personal ask, rather, on- on social media, um, and she was sent my way by, um, a dear friend of mine, Sarah. And um, just love when that happens, right? You know, uh, uh, personal recommendations from- from people that I think highly of, and- and i- it's really great.

Phil Dallmann: So, uh, well, that's, uh, just a prompt for all of you listeners out there, when we, when we put out there, you know, who do you wanna hear on, you know, if you have, uh, friends, colleagues, et cetera, that, um, are doing great work, and you think they should be highlighted on this show, um, you know, reach out. Uh, you know, shoot a message, um, across social media. We're @accesschampion on Twitter and Instagram, The Access Champion Podcast on Facebook. Hit us up on the comments, wherever. You can also reach us via email, uh, at, uh, accesschampion@gmail.com.

Phil Dallmann: Um, and that includes, you know, also beyond guests, topics, articles, um, general musings. Uh, just feel free to send them our way. We love staying in contact with you guys. Um, it- it's one way to support the podcast.

Phil Dallmann: Another way to support the podcast, seamless segue there, uh, is through our Patreon. We do provide this podcast free, uh, every, and we- we turn it around, uh, every single week, um, which, uh, does take time, but it also, uh, to make it accessible, uh, there is costs involved, um, and- and to reach as many people as we do there's costs involved, um, which, you know, currently i- is very much out of pocket. Um, so, uh, we'd love to- to- to bring those costs down, um, and on Patreon you can actually support us for as little as \$1 a month. It's such a- a l-... Uh, you know, e- e- every dollar counts. And especially, um, I know, for many of you who are artists or non-profit employees out there. Um, but for \$1 a month you can support us, and we send you, uh, a bunch of free content. Um, and you know, if you give a little bit more then, uh, we send you some swag. We have some really great some. Um, we're designing even more. Um, T shirts, mugs, water bottles, you know, p-, I like practical things.

Phil Dallmann: The link's in the, in the copy of this episode. It's across social media, but it is patreon.com/accesschampions, um, and uh, you know, we'd love to- to get a little more support. Um, and you know, in this episode we have an exclusive

extended conversation, um, about action items for allies, um, with Deja. Uh, so, you know, if you're interested in hearing that conversation, um, if you're always, if you're interested in hearing a little bit of additional stuff, uh, from our guests, uh, from our team, from our new steering committee/board, uh, you know, uh, then definitely, uh, sign up to- to- to support for, you know, again, as little as \$1 a month. Um, it goes a long way.

Phil Dallmann: Speaking of the steering committee/board, um, we- we are growing that board. We're really excited about those folks who have expressed interest, um, before we put the ask out, uh, a- and now since we put the ask out, uh, it's a really interesting diverse team, uh, with a lot of different experiences. And we're gonna, we want to continue to grow that. Uh, so if you are interested, um, you know, this is, uh, as I mentioned prev-, on previous episodes this is much more of a steering committee than a traditional non-profit board of trustees. Um, we are looking for folks who, uh, will share their prospective, their experiences, um, and- and you know, their resources in their, on a variety of industries a- and, um, work that's being done out there.

Phil Dallmann: So, um, really excited, again, for those who've come on board, uh, pun very much intended, and uh, (laughs), uh, looking forward to hearing from many other folks out there that- that maybe are interested. And if you are interested just shoot us a message at, uh, again, uh, accesschampion@gmail.com. And I think that's that. That's all of our business for- for the week. So without further ado, Access Champion, Deja Cabrera.

Phil Dallmann: All right. And we are here with Deja Cabrera, the Transgender Services Coordinator at the San Diego LGBT Community Center. Uh, thank you so much for, uh, taking the time to chat.

Deja Cabrera: Thanks for having me.

Phil Dallmann: I, uh, put out this ask, uh, to the world, because one of the things, um, after we completed our- our first season, uh, of this podcast I, you know, I'm big into self-evaluation and making sure, um, you know, finding the- the room for growth, and- and where, uh, gaps are. Um, and I was looking at who we had on, and what kind of work they've been doing, and one of the glaring gaps that- that we had was, uh, trans representation o- on the show, uh, even though I've, uh, constantly reading articles and- and, uh, I have a few friends that work in the field.

Phil Dallmann: Uh, so I put out this ask to, uh, social media, 'cause that's what you do nowadays, uh, and was like who knows, uh, anybody doing amazing work, and- and uh, our mutual friend, Sarah, uh, wrote, I believe the direct quote is, uh, "Deja is a kick-ass advocate out there," uh, "in San Diego." So that was all I needed to know that I wanted to have you on. Um-

Deja Cabrera: (laughs).

Phil Dallmann: (laughs). Uh, but I, uh, I'd love to hear a little bit about your journey, um, heading in- into this field.

Deja Cabrera: Yeah. You know, to be completely honest I kind of accidentally fell into activism.

Phil Dallmann: Okay.

Deja Cabrera: Um, it wasn't something that I ever saw myself being in. Um, I just knew growing up I was different-

Phil Dallmann: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Deja Cabrera: ... um, and I didn't have the language to express myself, um, because I grew up in a very conservative Christian Mexican household.

Phil Dallmann: Okay.

Deja Cabrera: Um, my father's a pastor.

Phil Dallmann: Okay.

Deja Cabrera: So, yeah. LGBT was not in our language, in our vocabulary. Whatever I picked up was what I picked up from school. Um, and even then it was like very monitored, um, going to private school and whatnot.

Phil Dallmann: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Deja Cabrera: Um, but yeah. I always knew I was different, and um, I always knew I was attracted to men without even having, uh, any sort of sexual experience with, um, with a man. Um, and so I remember, um, praying. You know, that's- that's what we, when you're a pastor's kid you're just, you're used to praying for everything. (laughs).

Phil Dallmann: That's, uh, that's number one in the tool kit. Yeah. (laughs).

Deja Cabrera: Yeah, yeah. (laughs). So, um, I would try to pray the gay away, and that was the only really language I could, um, really identify with at the time. Um, I knew I never felt like a man, and to me homosexuality is, um, uh, a man liking another man, or a woman liking another woman.

Phil Dallmann: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Deja Cabrera: At the time that's what it meant to me. Um, and I knew I had this attraction, however, I didn't have this identity. And I didn't know at the time that the two were very separate. Um, and it wasn't until I got older when I moved out of my family's house, um, that I kind of got reborn into a whole other world. Um, you

know, leaving the Christian bubble and going into the real world, "real world," (laughs), um, was something very new to me. And it's when I experienced life for the very first time. Um, I'm originally from Oxnard, California, which is about 90 minutes north of L.A., and ended up moving to Santa Barbara-

Phil Dallmann: Okay.

Deja Cabrera: ... which is about, um, 45 minutes from Oxnard, north of Oxnard.

Phil Dallmann: Yeah.

Deja Cabrera: Um, and-

Phil Dallmann: It's, and it's beautiful. Uh-

Deja Cabrera: Yes.

Phil Dallmann: Uh, we were there last year for a wedding, and I had never been to Santa Barbara before, uh, and I was blown away.

Deja Cabrera: Yeah. Very, very pretty. Very, very conservative.

Phil Dallmann: Okay.

Deja Cabrera: Um, so-

Phil Dallmann: Oh, right. There is that mission there. That's right.

Deja Cabrera: Yeah.

Phil Dallmann: (laughs).

Deja Cabrera: Yeah. And yeah, exactly. (laughs).

Phil Dallmann: (laughs).

Deja Cabrera: And so, um, yeah. The LGBT community is- is small, and um, the trans community is even smaller.

Phil Dallmann: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Deja Cabrera: And so when I moved to Santa Barbara, um, I was 21 at the time-

Phil Dallmann: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Deja Cabrera: ... and I kind of, uh, when I arrived it was around the time of their Pride Festival.

Phil Dallmann: Okay.

Deja Cabrera: And so I remember watching the drag show and thinking, "Oh, I could do that." Um, I've always been a performer, ever since I was a little kid. Talent shows, um, quinceañeras, you name it.

Phil Dallmann: (laughs).

Deja Cabrera: I was, I was choreographing. I was dancing. I was doing it all. Um, so performing is not something, is not new to me.

Phil Dallmann: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Deja Cabrera: Um, and so socially it's acceptable for a man to dress up as a woman and get into drag and perform.

Phil Dallmann: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Deja Cabrera: And so that's kind of what I did. And when I did it there was a feeling I've never felt before. It felt, I felt normal for the very first time, even though I'm wearing, you know, this crazy wig, these crazy costumes, crazy makeup. Um, it just felt like society could see me for the very first time. And I fostered that. Um, I started performing more and more as a drag queen, um, eventually making my way to Las Vegas, um, to- to have my own residency at Bally's Hotel.

Phil Dallmann: Oh, wow.

Deja Cabrera: Yeah. And um, Vegas is where I kind of found out that there are, there's such a thing as transgender performers. Um, and that's kind of where my whole world completely changed. And um, there wasn't any young trans people in Santa Barbara, um, and I knew transitioning was something that I wanted to do. So I eventually moved out of Vegas back to Santa Barbara, and started a public transition. Um, and the reason why I decided to go with my transition publicly was for educational purposes, but also because I was doing this completely alone and out in the open. I needed some guidance. (laughs).

Phil Dallmann: Okay. Yeah. Absolutely.

Deja Cabrera: I was, yeah. I was hoping someone, um, who knew someone... Santa Barbara's very small and there's a lot of different connections. Um, I could've easily, there's actually been quite a few times where I've had private dance lessons with a student, and the mom knows a surgeon who happens to be, who knows, who's married to an endocrinologist, who... You know, all of these things.

Phil Dallmann: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Deja Cabrera: So my transition happened very smoothly, um, and with a ton of support. Now-

Phil Dallmann: Yeah, because it's gotta be a huge, uh, I mean, I'm looking for a better word, but kind of there- there's risk involved, uh-

Deja Cabrera: Yes.

Phil Dallmann: ... being- being public with that transition, um-

Deja Cabrera: Absolutely.

Phil Dallmann: ... especially in a conservative town.

Deja Cabrera: Right. And that was something that I was, um, worried for, but at the same time I wasn't, because I was already an infamous drag queen in Santa Barbara-

Phil Dallmann: (laughs). Okay.

Deja Cabrera: ... transition- transitioning. When I came out as trans it was not a big deal.

Phil Dallmann: Okay.

Deja Cabrera: Everyone was just like, okay.

Phil Dallmann: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Deja Cabrera: Um, which kinda sucked. I wish there was a parade or something. (laughs).

Phil Dallmann: (laughs). Oh yeah. I had a, I had a friend who- who came out, um, and he, the way he tells the story is he came out to his parents, and he expected a, just a- a, you know, a big cry fest or, you know, what have you, and they were like, "Yeah, no, we know."

Deja Cabrera: Yeah.

Phil Dallmann: (laughs). That was their response. He was so underwhelmed. He was like, "I didn't get to fight. I didn't get to cry. I didn't get to do anything." It just was like-

Deja Cabrera: Yeah.

Phil Dallmann: ... yeah, business as usual. (laughs).

Deja Cabrera: Totally. And- and it was very much like that for me as well when I came out as, um, trans to my family, to my friends, I'm sorry.

Phil Dallmann: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Deja Cabrera: Um, coming out to my family was a little bit trickier. Um, they didn't know I, they knew I lived in Vegas, however, they thought I was teaching dance. They didn't know I was a performer and doing it full-time. Um, so I had to come out to them a few times. I came out to them as, um, a gay man, um, came out to them as a, as a drag queen, and then came out to them as trans. And when I came out to them as trans I was ready, um, to lose them, like forever. Um, just because that's what I was told. Like family doesn't accept trans people. It's really hard, especially when you come from a Mexican household, a religious Mexican household.

Deja Cabrera: Um, but my story is very different in the sense of I have an accepting family. Um, I have a community that supported me from day one. So my transition and my struggle, um, has always been within myself-

Phil Dallmann: Okay.

Deja Cabrera: ... no- not within a community that was unaccepting. So I had to deal with that, um, for a very long time, just 'cause I was unsure of like why are they being so accepting? Why are they being so nice? Um, you know, you start to second-guess yourself. Um-

Phil Dallmann: Yeah, I imagine, especially if your expectations are polar opposite going into that.

Deja Cabrera: Yeah, yeah. So, um, transitioned, um, very openly and publicly, and that kind of sparked, um, other things to happen in Santa Barbara. There was a, um, a Trans Wellness Center developed, and because I was, um, one of the younger trans people, I'm a trans person of color, um, they kind of created, um, this space for all trans identities, and made me the face of the center. Um, so what that basically meant is I was going out to events. I was talking about the center.

Deja Cabrera: Um, and that's kind of how I fell into the activism role, is I just started talking about trans gen-, trans gender challenges, and the things that our community face, and that people don't really understand why we face those things, or, um, how we get those, ourselves in those particular situations. Um, so it all, again, just kind of happened. Um, (laughs), it wasn't something I planned or went to school for. Um, and yeah.

Phil Dallmann: And then-

Deja Cabrera: [crosstalk 00:15:41].

Phil Dallmann: ... h- how did you land, uh, then how did you land at the, uh, the San Diego LGBT Community Center?

Deja Cabrera: So, um, the, Santa Barbara's very small, (laughs)-

Phil Dallmann: Mm-hmm (affirmative), mm-hmm (affirmative).

Deja Cabrera: ... and um, I had left Santa Barbara to grow as a performer, and came back. Um, and so when I came back to Santa Barbara is kind of when the activism took-took place.

Phil Dallmann: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Deja Cabrera: And um, it got really challenging for me to just walk out of my front door and go to the grocery store. I- I wa-, because I was doing all of these trainings, because I was, um, openly trans and open about my transition, um, it- it got, it kinda got very difficult for me just to go out in public without being recognized, or, um, just tagged as the trans girl. I just, I'm like any other person. Like this is a job. I clock in, I clock out. I go home and I'm a regular person. However, with activism you don't really, it's not really that type of vibe.

Deja Cabrera: Um, so it got really challenging for me, and um, I've just always wanted to feel normal. I've always wanted to just walk amongst society with no one paying me any attention. Um, and when I do crave attention, that's what the stage is for. Um, you know-

Phil Dallmann: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Deja Cabrera: ... so it- it just got very difficult. So I wanted to grow as an activist, as a professional, as a woman, and um, being in Santa Barbara for seven, eight years, um, it was time to leave the nest. Santa Barbara really helped raise Deja, really. Um, and it was time for me to thank them, and by doing that it was going to be, um, making, creating something inside of me and for my community better. And so when I decided to move there was different locations. I was thinking of San Francisco, New York, Miami, um, L.A. And D-, San Diego presented this opportunity to me, and um, had this job opening, and I took it. And here I am.

Phil Dallmann: Fantastic. Uh, and uh, uh, they're lucky to have you.

Deja Cabrera: Thank you.

Phil Dallmann: Um, just knowing, uh, all- all the programming you have going on. Uh, tell me a little bit about what's currently going on at the San Diego LGBT Community Center.

Deja Cabrera: Yeah, so the center is committed to, um, to helping the trans community, um, thrive and be successful. And we do that through Project Trans, which is the program I oversee. And we have support groups. I have about 10 support groups for all trans identities.

Phil Dallmann: Oh wow.

Deja Cabrera: Um, yeah. So there's non-binary, trans fem, trans masculine. Um, I also have support groups for people who are partnered to trans people, or who have a friend or a family member, who kinda need support, um, with their trans gender loved ones. So that has been really good. Um, 'cause it- it- it's a need as well. Um, game night, things like that. So a lot of support groups, a lot of social activities. Um, and then, you know, when the current administration attacks our community we rally together. And we're doing a march. We're doing a rally. We're going to City Hall. Um, you know, so there's always something happening. (laughs).

Phil Dallmann: Well, and it sounds like in a lot of ways you're- you're helping foster and build, uh, and maintain the community there, uh, throughout all the different demographics within the trans community.

Deja Cabrera: Yeah. You know, I- I do this work with the mindset of, um, of hoping if- if I can be there for someone I wish was for me throughout my transition. And um, you know, it- it's, there's no how-to guide to transition. It's all based on experience, and um, what others have done, and trial and error. And I have gone through a lot of trial and error, and so I really developed a transitional blueprint that's personalized and customi- customized to the trans individual.

Phil Dallmann: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Deja Cabrera: Um, so a, so a trans person comes into the center at the very beginning of the transition, and needs help with name change documents, hormone navigation, um, sprucing up their resume, whatever it may be-

Phil Dallmann: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Deja Cabrera: ... um, I'm the point of contact, and I really help develop that for them, and with them.

Phil Dallmann: That's fantastic. Um, so, you know, one of the things I love to do, um, with this podcast is, uh, uh, give people the opportunity to dream their dreams. 'Cause I- I don't we all get that opportunity as often as we should, um, to just put big lofty goals and- and visions out there. Um, what- what do you hope for, uh, as- as the future of, uh, Project Trans, but also, um, sort of the- the advocacy work, and for the trans community at large.

Deja Cabrera: Gosh, you know, I think just for- for us to be able to get hired, um, would be an in-, an incredible thing. You know, so many trans people don't have the, um, what the right word? They don't have the- the resources, or sometimes even the motivation to-

Phil Dallmann: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Deja Cabrera: ... um, to just get up and- and do something, um, something as easy as getting a job. Because there's things that trigger that, right? If the, if their name changes aren't legal, if their gender on their ID isn't- isn't something that they identify with, you know, how do they get a job? Um, how do we go to school, you know, when we're constantly thinking about being mis-gendered. Or, um, or our gender e-, our gender expression not matching our gender identity because of safety.

Phil Dallmann: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Deja Cabrera: You know, I think that's another thing, is that we have to really think about the safety of our community, and part of that has to do with the safety of our country. Um, you know, we really need trans people to feel supported, and um, I mean, the, my biggest dream would be for any person who's trans or not just to be able to live as their authentic self without fear, or without, um, without feeling neglected and/or unloved. Um, so yeah. That would, that would be it.

Phil Dallmann: I, uh, I fully support that dream. That's a dream that I, uh, I- I run towards as well. Um, thank you so much, Deja, for, uh, for one, taking the time to chat today, but also, um, for all the work that you're doing, and have done, and continue to do. Um, it's incredibly important work, and- and uh, so needed, especially, um, in our current climate. Um-

Deja Cabrera: Yeah.

Phil Dallmann: So thank you so much, and thank you for being an access champion.

Deja Cabrera: Thank you. Thank you, Phil.

Deja Cabrera: Thank again to Deja for taking the time to chat. It was, uh, definitely a little early on the West Coast, uh, for that interview. So I appreciate, I appreciate the, that, uh, um, scheduling-wise. (laughs). Uh, but, um, you know, uh, a great conversation, and uh, as we mentioned at the top of the episode, if you want to hear a little bit more with Deja, um, specifically about some action items for- for allies, uh, for the trans community make sure that you sign up to support us for, again, as little \$1 a month on Patreon.

Deja Cabrera: Links in the copy of the episode, uh, and across social media. Um, but again, it's patreon.com/accesschampion. Um, we, uh, hope you'll consider supporting us, and again, for as little as \$1 a month, uh, you get, uh, exclusive content, uh, from each guest every week. Um, so, uh, that's that.

Deja Cabrera: Uh, thank you, as always, to our Executive Producer, Matt Kerstetter, um, for making us sound great each and every single week. Um, so I'm incredibly appreciative for all the work that he does, uh, turning around our- our episode, um, weekly. You know, uh, that's no small task, um, and uh, we are appreciative. Uh, our Associate Producer, Miss Kelsey Rose Brown, for doing all

of the things that she does across social media and in guest relations, and- and all of the above. Um, Eric Walton for that dope theme song. And Tommy Karr for our kick-ass logo, of which, please, uh, if you have any suggestions, uh, listeners out there for other, uh, communities that we can represent, or communities we currently represent, how we can represent them better. Um, please just go ahead and reach out to us.

Deja Cabrera: Uh, we'll be back again next week. And remember inclusion believers, never stop running through that brick wall.