

Philip 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. We're joined by Perry Cohen, who is the founder and executive director of the Venture Out Project. Another great organic guest, uh, came to us from a former podcast guest, Sarah Aziz, uh, who's also a dear, dear friend of mine. Um, and it was so funny, I put an ask out just looking, uh, to find folks out there that are doing, you know, dope work in the world of Trans Inclusion. And, uh, uh, Sarah immediately was like, "Perry. Duh." Uh, and for years Sarah had been talking about her friend Perry.

Philip Dallmann: Um, so it was so great to get on the phone with him, uh, and chat about all the great work he's doing with the venture out project. Um, so I'm very excited to share that with you. Um, I'm currently recording this at the Lead Popups studio, uh, which is a lot fancier than we were last year. Not open air, less Rihanna in the background. Uh, which is very, very exciting. Um, we'll be rolling out a bunch of these interviews that we're doing this week, um, across the year. I think last year we ran them all the way to January. Um, and we're, we're just really excited to be sitting down with so many great folks. Um, I am here with our associate producer, Ms. Kelsey Rose Brown, who is just killing the game, uh, run around finding guests, sharing our swag. Um, and uh, hopefully we're gonna get her to cohost a few episodes here.

Philip Dallmann: Um, but just really, really excited, uh, uh, to share all of that. And, um, if you already follow us, you'll have seen some of this on social media. If you don't already follow us, please do. Uh, we are at Access Champion on Instagram and Twitter, and The Access Champion podcast on Facebook. We are also on Patreon, uh, which allows our listeners to help, uh, fund our Accessibility efforts. Um, for as little as \$1 a month you can support us. You get a sticker and access to all of this exclusive content. For almost every episode now we're having additional conversations or grabbing additional content, um, to share with our Patreon subscribers.

Philip Dallmann: So, uh, if you go to patreon.com/accesschampions, you can support us again for as little as \$1 a month, and we're eternally grateful, um, as that helps cover costs such as our transcripts. Or, um, as we move forward with our, our hopes and dreams of, of having our shows interpreted, uh, as well as, as filmed and, and, and so on and so on, um, to be the most inclusive podcast in the galaxy. And I think that's that. So without further ado, Access Champion Perry Cohen.

Philip Dallmann: All right. And we are here with Perry Cohen, the founder and executive director of The Venture Out Project. Uh, thanks for taking the time to chat, Perry.

Perry Cohen: Yeah. Thanks for having me on the show.



Philip Dallmann: Uh, you are a, uh, another one of our, uh, organic guests, I like to call them. Um, a previous podcast guests, and one of my, uh... one of our mutual friends, both of our very good friends, uh, Sarah Aziz, um, when I put out the ass looking for folks doing interesting work in the LGBTQ community. And she was like, "You know, I know Perry." (laughs)

Perry Cohen: (laughs)

Philip Dallmann: And I was like, "Yeah, yeah, no, I know you're right." Um, but, uh, I'm so excited to chat. I know summer is a busy time for you guys, um, at Venture Out and, um, I I'd love to hear a little bit, uh, because I, I did a deep dive. I, I didn't know the actual work that you did, uh, just that you're an A-plus human. Um-

Perry Cohen: (laughs)

Philip Dallmann: Uh, but I'd love to hear a little bit about your journey, um, in- into developing and, and creating this work at Venture Out.

Perry Cohen: Yeah, absolutely. I, um, I love telling the story 'cause it was, it was a fun process to have happen originally and it's fun to get to relive it. Um, so thanks for inviting me to share it.

Philip Dallmann: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Perry Cohen: Um, so yeah, it was about 2014 and I was working a, a corporate job. I ran the leadership development and talent management in, uh, uh, a big grocery distribution company. And I'd come up kind of through the ranks. I'd run warehouses and had a, had a operations background. And um, it was fun at all. It was in New Hampshire, which is where I'd grown up. And I wound up spending a lot of my time sitting under a fluorescent light, looking out a small window at the mountains and wishing I was in those mountains. Um, and I'd, I'd grown up a hiker and a backpacker and a skier and everything. So, um, you know, it, it, it was kind of part of who... my DNA.

Perry Cohen: Um, and around this time, like late 2014, early 2015, um, I was having, I guess maybe you could call it my mid life crisis, um, in which I was realizing that, um, I was transgender. And that I was ready to come out and transition both socially and also physically.



Philip Dallmann: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Perry Cohen: And part of the way I dealt with kind of all those big emotions, and fears, and feelings and everything was to do what I'd always done, which was to go hiking. Um, so there's a famous mountain in Southern New Hampshire where I live called Mount Monadnock. Um, and it's, it's a bald summit, which means there's no trees. It's just rock. You know.

Philip Dallmann: Okay.

Perry Cohen: And it's kind of a sad story why it's all rock. The... [inaudible 00:06:06] on the way, uh, colonists came in, um, and onto this native American land. Um, they thought that there was a wolf problem on the top of the mountain, and so they set intentional fires, um, and burned all the trees, and all the wolves and took away this um, very sacred space to um, you know the, the Pennacooks and the Abenaki tribe who was up there. Um, and so it's kind of a sad story and it's left this beautiful granite summit.

Philip Dallmann: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Perry Cohen: And the reason that that's significant to the story is because, you know, usually you hike and you're kind of like just walk. Um, and this section you have to scramble up this rock, and there's no handholds, um, and you're just kind of putting one foot in front of the other, and you have to trust that your feet are going to hold you up this rock that's, huh, like probably a 30 to 40 degree angle. So, it's really steep.

Philip Dallmann: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Perry Cohen: Um, and I remember looking at it and being kind of nervous and just saying, "Okay, I'm just going to put my foot there and I'm going to trust that it's going to hold me." And it did. And I did that a second time and a third time, and all of a sudden I had this big kind of like epiphanic moment where it was like, "Oh my God. This body that for so long has felt so foreign to me and I felt so alienated from, and I just didn't identify with. You know, these hips that are two round in this butt that's too curvy, like this is the body that's getting me to the top of this mountain." Um, and I just thought this is incredible.

Perry Cohen: And for the first time, probably in my whole life, I loved my body and I appreciated my body. And I thought, this is, this is an incredible feeling and I'm fortunate enough that I get to do this all the time. Wouldn't it be cool if other Trans and queer folks could have this kind of experience where they could feel totally embodied um, and appreciative of this body that for so long they just didn't like, or didn't feel right, or society told them wasn't, wasn't the right one for them.



Perry Cohen: Um, so I get up to the top of the mountain and I'm still thinking about this. And um, I realized, okay, I know what I need to do. I need to quit this corporate job where I'm inside and working long hours, and longing to be outdoors, and I need to work... A, I need to transition myself. And then B, I need to start working with the queer community. So, I go down the mountain and um, I quit my job-

Philip Dallmann: Mm-hmm (affirmative) (laughs)

Perry Cohen: ... and I had-

Philip Dallmann: The start of every great adventure.

Perry Cohen: Yeah, exactly.

Philip Dallmann: (laughs)

Perry Cohen: And I had a partner and two kids, and a mortgage and a dog. And so then I go... And I was the primary breadwinner. My partner was in Grad school at this point-

Philip Dallmann: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Perry Cohen: ... and I go online and look for queer outdoor educator jobs and adventure roles. And there's nothing, and I have this moment of panic oh my go-... Oh man, I got this out of order, (laughs)

Philip Dallmann: (laughs)

Perry Cohen: I should found the job before I quit the other one. Um, and so I got pretty upset and despondent for you know, maybe 36 hours. And then I was like, wait a minute. I've run whole divisions of a company. I've, um, I've got a business background. I've... I'm very outdoors, I know how to do this. I should, I should just start this thing. Um, and so that was the origin story, the genesis of Venture Out. Um, I decided just that, you know, I'm going to start a nonprofit. Um, so I incorporated, um, and I started planning trips and that, that was the beginning. And unfortunately I had no idea how hard it was to run a nonprofit, or I probably never would have done it.

Philip Dallmann: (laughs) Yeah. Uh, it, it is not easy. Uh, but I, I love that, um, sort of, well, it doesn't exist, so I should just create it-

Perry Cohen: Yeah.

Philip Dallmann: ... uh, kind of thought process I think. Uh, it's a commonality, I think through a, a lot of people who've created great work. Um, they were like, "Well, there's... We got to fill this gap. We've got to do this thing." Um, and honestly, actually



that's kind of how this podcast started. I also quit my job and was like, "Well, I don't really know what I'm going to do now, but I want to do this kind of thing. Well, this thing doesn't exist. All right, let's do it." Um-

Perry Cohen: Yeah.

Philip Dallmann: (laughs) Uh, that's fantastic. So, um, if you could, if you could, um, you know, paint us a word picture, uh, of, of what, um, you know, uh, someone looking to experience, uh, Venture Out, what would they be in for?

Perry Cohen: Yeah, sure. So we... the... our first summer we started with just backpacking trips-

Philip Dallmann: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Perry Cohen: ... and since then... That was five years ago, we're on our fifth summer now. And since then we've expanded quite a bit. So we now offer, um, everything from a two-hour day hike, which is really kind of very mellow, mostly flat, um, pretty accessible to a lot of folks. To some paddling trips, um, to sn- snowshoe trips that are day... These are all day events.

Philip Dallmann: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Perry Cohen: Um, and then we also do ski trips in the winter where we would stay in a condo and ski every day. Um, and then kind of our flagship adventures are our multi-day backpacking trips. And so for these, they're very beginner friendly. Um, we've tried to kind of identify and reduce as many barriers to entry as possible. So, we provide all the gear, we provide all the food. Uh, we do all the scouting, all the safety work is, is on us. So basically all you have to do is show up with clothes and good shoes, and we will fully outfit you. Um, we do all kinds of introductions 'cause most people, you know, there's a lot of anxiety. You're going, uh, with a brand new group of people who you don't know. You're going to sleep in a tent next to strangers.

Philip Dallmann: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Perry Cohen: You're gonna walk in the woods. Um, so we do a lot of talking around, you know, what's that going to be like. Um, lots of kind of community building activities, um, to get folks to feel comfortable and safe with each other.

Philip Dallmann: Yeah.

Perry Cohen: And then, yeah, so we start-

Philip Dallmann: That's [crosstalk 00:12:14].



Perry Cohen: ... with basic camping and then we go out, and the hikes are anywhere from three to eight miles per day.

Philip Dallmann: Okay.

Perry Cohen: And the elevation can be anything from flat to, uh, on some of our experience trips we might do 2000 feet of elevation, um, in a day. Um, and then we camp together, we cook together. Uh, we always try to go swimming, which has been usually people's favorite experience 'cause a lot of folks will say, "You know, being Trans or non-binary or queer, I didn't want to go out in public in a bathing suit." Um, and... "Or I didn't feel like I could swim in a way that was affirming to me." And we find these isolated swimming holes and people can swim in whatever feels good and safe and comfortable to them. And I, I can't tell you how many people said, "Wow, like, you know, I haven't swam in five years."

Philip Dallmann: Wow.

Perry Cohen: "And this was mind blowing." So, that's a really important part of, of every trip. Um, and as much as possible, we try to make sure we can take folks swimming. Um, and yeah, we learn how to, you know, hang our foods so critters and bears don't get it. We learn how to read the map and compass, um, all that kind of stuff. And, and mostly what we do is we build community and we use the outdoors as a, as a way to do that.

Philip Dallmann: That's fantastic. Um, you, you mentioned a little bit of, of uh, what folks have said, you know, after the swimming adventure. But what has the, the feedback been from the community, um, as you've, as you've done, I mean, five years now worth of, of adventures?

Perry Cohen: Yeah, it's been mind-blowingly positive. Um, and that was... You know, it was always part of my vision. I, I called it the Venture Out Project with the idea that project sounds fluid to me-

Philip Dallmann: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Perry Cohen: ... and it sounds collaborative. And so I've always tried to make a point of getting as much feedback from our community as possible to say, you know, this is my vision for what a trip looks like, but what do you all want? And I would say being able to listen to that feedback has really informed our trips. We've cut the mileage down 'cause people said they wanted a lot more time in camp versus hiking all day long. Um, and we've changed the kind of trips we do, um, based on that kind of feedback. But I think the coolest thing that happened in terms of feedback was, um, I had this one participant and he was on his third trip with us and I said, "You know, this is, this is fabulous. Don't get me wrong. I'm, I'm so thrilled that you're coming on all these trips. But you have all the experience, you have all the gear, you don't need us to go backpacking."



Perry Cohen: And he looked at me and started laughing and he said, "You know, Perry, you're completely missing you've built here. I don't, I don't come here for the backpacking. I come here for the community that we're building together." I was like, "Ah."

Philip Dallmann: That's, that's fantastic.

Perry Cohen: Yeah.

Philip Dallmann: That's what you want.

Perry Cohen: Yeah exactly.

Philip Dallmann: Yeah. You're not, you're not just teaching survival skills. You're, you're teaching, uh, you know, or you're facilitating a community where, uh, folks may be feeling a little more isolated, um-

Perry Cohen: Yeah.

Philip Dallmann: ... in their day to day. That's really, really great. Um, and, and, uh, has it been mostly local folks or are people coming from a distance or?

Perry Cohen: Yeah, people are coming from all across the country. Um, and this summer we actually have some folks coming from, uh, Canada too. Um, so we've, we've got folks fly in from everywhere and all over.

Philip Dallmann: That's fantastic. Uh, I love-

Perry Cohen: Yeah.

Philip Dallmann: ... that so much. Um, well um, you've clearly experienced, uh, exponential growth, um, over the last, you know, five years. Um, what are, what are some of the things on the docket right now um, going forward?

Perry Cohen: Yeah. Yeah. So we, um... This summer we ran our first ever volunteer training where we bought, brought in 24 volunteers. They had to go through an application and an interview process, and they're basically Venture Out hiking ambassadors in their own local communities. Um, so we've got... I think we added when 20 different states now that we now have volunteers in, um, with the idea being that they know their local outdoor spaces and they also know their local queer community.

Philip Dallmann: Mm-hmm (affirmative)



Perry Cohen: So that's kind of the vision for the future is, um, to have... to use your word to grow organically um, by having these volunteers out there. And giving them the infrastructure and the support and the insurance behind them to, to run hikes in their community. Um, and kind of, we, we advertise for them. And so I'm, I'm really excited to see what people bring because they're the ones who are super creative and have all these ideas and are gonna... I think they're going to be the next iteration of Venture Out.

Philip Dallmann: Yeah. That... I mean, that's wonderful. And, and like two fold there, not only do you bring um, new perspectives and ideas in um, but also, um, uh, helping them facilitate in their own community, um, honestly makes, makes your programming more accessible to those who may not be able to travel to you.

Perry Cohen: Right.

Philip Dallmann: Um, and, and, and then can experience it, close... a little bit closer to home, which, you know, again, in a, in a variety of ways can be more accessible to, to different people. Um, that's really wonderful.

Perry Cohen: Yeah. And that was a huge, huge impetus for the volunteer training was exactly that. We had all these people saying, "When are you coming to Ohio?" And I was like, "Oh Geez, I don't know when." Um, but to be able to bring this to them is incredible. 'Cause we had... We did a road trip-

Philip Dallmann: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Perry Cohen: ... last summer. We hit 20 cities in the 18 days-

Philip Dallmann: Wow.

Perry Cohen: ... and we had some people drive six hours one way for a two hour hike. Um, and it blew my mind, you know, and we're like, "What... This is amazing. But why are you coming?" And they're like, "This is the one day a year I get to be with another Trans person. Like, I wouldn't miss this." And you know, they took time off of work. They spent all this money to drive and stuff. And I was like, wow, we gotta help build this network.

Philip Dallmann: Yeah. Uh, that... I mean, and again, look at that, it, it grows or you know, it's an idea that came about organically from the community, you know.

Perry Cohen: Right.

Philip Dallmann: Um, and I always say that, the, the, the most sustainable programming or sustainable ideas are ones that come from the community you're trying to serve, rather than you just like saying, "All right, well, we're going to do this



thing." Um, but being able to receive that feedback, which is a, you know... My favorite thing to hear from any guests that's doing anything, uh, is, and you brought it up without any prompting, was that you were receiving all this feedback, uh, and, and facilitating it into your programming, which is um, fantastic.

Philip Dallmann: Um, that, that's great. Um, I love that, that growth. Um, one of the things I do love to do, um, on the podcast because as you say, um, or as you said, uh, running nonprofits are hard.

Perry Cohen: (laughs)

Philip Dallmann: (laughs) Uh, and we're not always, you know... sometimes we're, we're burdened with budgets and, and, and sometimes limitations. Um, but I do like to facilitate folks, uh, you know, dreaming their dreams. Uh, so it's a safe space, uh, to, to throw out your, your grandest thoughts and dreams um, for the future of Venture Out and, and the future of, um, sort of, uh, this type of inclusion work in general.

Perry Cohen: Yeah. Um, well, we, you know, we do a couple of things. We do these trips and then we also, um, do a lot of education work. So, we work with a lot of college outing clubs or schools or camps or places that want to be more Trans and non-binary inclusive. So, um, yeah, so my big hope is that the outdoor space in general becomes more inclusive of folks of all identities and body types and sizes. It feels like right now, um, people still notice if there's a queer person or a person of color or somebody in a wheelchair outdoors, and they seem kind of shocked. And I think, um, through education and exposure, it'd be great if that became um, what people expect when they think of, of going outside that it truly is a space for, for everyone.

Perry Cohen: So, I think that's my, that's my big dream is that everyone gets outside, everyone feels safe and affirmed there. And, um, I think then because of that more people have a greater appreciation for our earth, and our climate, and our natural world. And maybe we can work on some of this climate change stuff and some of this environmental destruction. Um, and I, I think getting people to care about the world and have a personal stake in it will really uh, drive people to demand and, and start to make some of that change.

Philip Dallmann: Abso- absolutely. Uh, and, and what a wonderful like kind of twofold approach there. Um, you know, you're, you're, you know, facilitating inclusion, which then uh, ends up helping facilitate a little bit of this, uh, other work that is so, so necessary, uh, given our, our actively dying planet. Um, well that's fantastic. Uh, I'm so excited for all of that. (laughs) Uh, as a, as a non-hiker slash um, non woodsman, uh, though my wife is, is, uh, you know, she loves a good hike. She's climbed Kilimanjaro and all that.



Perry Cohen: Oh wow.

Philip Dallmann: Um, I'm, I'm, I always say we vacation very differently.

Perry Cohen: (laughs)

Philip Dallmann: Um, she would prefer to like go through the jungles of the Amazon. I'd prefer a beach with a fruity drink. Um, you know, six in one, half a dozen in the other, we try to split it up. But (laughs)

Perry Cohen: [crosstalk 00:21:39]

Philip Dallmann: Uh, um, I love that you are facilitating this experience, uh, for, for so many folks. And, and honestly, facilitating community is one of the most important things I, I think anyone can do. Um, so that, uh, no one feels isolated. No one feels alone, um, that they can connect with people, um, and feel safe. And, and um, you know, thank you for, for doing that. Um, and uh, thank you for being an Access Champion.

Perry Cohen: Thanks. Appreciate it.

Philip Dallmann: Thanks again to Perry for taking the time to chat. Uh, just really fun and, uh, as I always say, uh, it's always great to have an organic guest like that. And, and so shout out also to, uh, Sarah Aziz. Thank you for the recommendation. Thank you as always to our executive producer, Matt Kerstetter, for making us sound great each and every single week. Uh, thank you to our associate producer, Ms. Kelsey Rose Brown for all the things she does. And, and as we're here at the Lead Conference, she's literally doing the art, uh, for some of these episodes right now.

Philip Dallmann: Um, and uh, thank you to Tommy Karr for our logo. Uh, Eric Walton for, uh, our dope theme song. Uh, and Savannah Cooper, our champion intern for all the work she's been doing on social media. We'll be back again next week and remember, Inclusion Believers never stop running through that brick wall.

