

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. We have another great episode for you this week. Also from our pop-up studio at the Kennedy Center LEAD Conference this past summer out in Denver. This week we sit down with Hannah Weisman, who's the Director of Education over at the Boston Athenaeum, which is a really interesting thing. It's an independent library. So it is a membership organization or it has an admission, and they're doing some interesting things in the realm of socioeconomic access, a hurdle that public libraries that are funded by the state and city, et cetera, don't necessarily have as hard of a time navigating. And Hannah's really leading the charge, especially in her role as Director of Education, and wanting to make sure that as many people as possible have access to really an outstanding collection that they have there.

Philip Dallmann: So really excited to share that with you guys this week. A couple of quick things. One, I want to note that audience feedback is so important because we're learning, we're always learning. And whether it's content or language or what have you, or in this case one thing I want to point out is that, we received some feedback on sound levels for certain things. And" I reached over to my producer and I was like, Oh, can we bump it up?" And then of course that leads to a further conversation, which is they go, "Well what ..." Matt goes, "What levels are you recording at?" And I was like, "Well this, I try not to ever go to the red because red is bad." And he's like, "Yes, red is bad." But he was like, "You really should be trying to get just under red." And here I am being like, "Oh, it's just bouncing up a little bit. That's exactly where we want to be." So you may notice a better quality in sound levels, at least on the intro and outro, and all future interviews will be recorded at appropriate levels.

Philip Dallmann: Wild. But that's not something I would've clocked. I do listen to every episode, but I tend to listen to everything pretty loudly and so I wasn't necessarily catching it. But a few people reached out and brought it to my attention and when I brought my headphones to a more typical level, I also saw what was being said. And so we are well on our way to solving that but I just wanted to point out that we really, really appreciate feedback from you guys. It's invaluable, it's invaluable.

Philip Dallmann: Another way that you can support us is through Patreon and we are on Patreon. We have a handful of supporters on there and you can support us for as little as \$1 a month, and you don't walk away empty-handed. We're constantly putting up new exclusive content, and for \$1 we're going to send you a sticker, which I think they're pretty great. And for more than a dollar, we have additional swag, additional on-air shoutouts, things of that nature. But for \$1 a month at patreon.com/accesschampions, you can support us and get access to a ton of really interesting content. We've started doing these sort of additional deep dives or play games with a lot of our guests. And we're actually going to release a couple of interviews exclusively on Patreon from the Kennedy Center LEAD Conference. So if you want access to everything, \$1 a month and it's over on at patreon.com/accesschampions.

Philip Dallmann: You can follow the rest of our content on social media, we're @accesschampion on Facebook ... Excuse me, on Twitter and Instagram. On Facebook we are The Access Champion Podcast and there's a ton of great content that goes up there. Our champion intern, Savannah Cooper and associate producer, Miss Kelsey Rose Brown, are constantly thinking of new things to share and create. We're all about quality over quantity so we aren't flooding your feed. So if you aren't already following us, please go ahead and do so, so you're not missing out on anything.

Philip Dallmann: Want to take a quick moment to note after, even after I recorded last week's intro and outro and we were able to tag this in the social media and linked to it, but People's Light and Temple University along with the National Theater, were able to collaborate in bringing those glasses over here that Tabitha was speaking about last week. The smart glasses that the National has been using for captioning. So they're over here, People's Light Theater. Check them out, they're doing incredible work. They also have a full relaxed performance series as well. Really just putting audience first in a lot of ways. So, and obviously we're big fans of Temple University. We can't wait to run our interview with the Roger Ideishi in a few weeks.

Philip Dallmann: So, [inaudible 00:05:42] to that again in this episode. But a really cool thing, we had just got done highlighting and saying how wonderful it was over in England and now it's here, and just in our backyard if you're in the Northeast. So that's really great. And then I think that's that. Trying to keep it as short and sweet as possible this week. So without further ado, Access Champion, Hannah Weisman.

Philip Dallmann: All right. And we are here at our LEAD 2019 pop-up studio here in Denver, Colorado. And we are joined by Hannah Weissman, who is the Director of Education at Boston Athenaeum. Got it right.

Hannah Weisman: Yep.

Philip Dallmann: Did have to write it out phonetically. But thank you so much for taking the time to chat.

Hannah Weisman: Thank you.

Philip Dallmann: So have you been to LEAD before?

Hannah Weisman: I have not. This is my first time. I'm super excited to be here.

Philip Dallmann: Well, welcome.

Hannah Weisman: Thank you.

Philip Dallmann: The conference as a whole is excited to have you. I was just speaking to somebody earlier today and I described LEAD as the warmest conference I'd

ever been to and it's what brings me back year after year after year. Just a lot of lovely humans, which is like fantastic, right? It's such-

Hannah Weisman: Yes. After one day I agree.

Philip Dallmann: Fantastic. So I'd love to hear a little bit, because this is my favorite kind of interview. Don't tell the people that I've known for years and have had on the show, but when I know absolutely nothing about you and your work, I'd love to hear a little bit about your journey to becoming Director of Education.

Hannah Weisman: Sure. The Boston Athenaeum is a membership library, which is a little bit of a unique animal in the cultural field these days. We were founded before there was a public library system in Boston. So instead of just being free to everyone, we don't receive municipal or public funding. So we have an annual fee that people pay, and this is a business model that goes back to 1807.

Philip Dallmann: Oh, wow.

Hannah Weisman: So we are a membership library and it's a little bit of a confusing concept for some people. One of the big challenges we have is helping people understand that even though we have a fee associated with us, we are actually open to all and that we want people from all walks of life and all curiosity levels to come engage with us, use our resources and have access.

Hannah Weisman: Personally, I am the first Director of Education at the library. I come out of the museum world and the library hadn't had this position before. We have lots of people who work on engagements, so we have a reader services department, we have a membership department. But this idea of introducing educational programming as it exists in a museum setting is relatively new to us. And for me, coming out of the museum field, education is really all about helping people indulge their curiosity. It's about facilitating opportunities to learn as opposed to telling people, "This is the information you have to know, this date, that famous person." It's really about getting people access to information and resources that allow them to explore the things that they're interested in.

Philip Dallmann: That's awesome. We've only had one other library on. We had, I'm blanking on her name, but from the High Skill Library in the New York public library system. So I'm fascinated by libraries and how they exist in the cultural field because they are, they do. What are maybe some of the differences between education in a museum setting as opposed ... While the principles sort of remain the same, the logistics are different. What are some of the differences between the two?

Hannah Weisman: The biggest difference I see is gallery programming. Gallery programming is such a staple of the museum world. Where you have the opportunity to engage visitors inside of an exhibition, whether that's a gallery talk with a docent or it's a hands on interactive, or it's a preschool story time that's happening. The library doesn't really have the same kind of physical space. The library I'm at, we

happen to have one exhibition gallery and we do some gallery programming when we have exhibits there. But we have 900 ... I don't know, lots and lots and lots of other square feet of space that are not galleries. I can't do the math off the top of my head.

Philip Dallmann: No one here is tracking it.

Hannah Weisman: I did not get into the arts sector because I'm a mathematician. So changing the thinking for myself about how do you engage and what are the points of entry for facilitating those interactions is the biggest difference for me. Also, I had to learn classification systems and-

Philip Dallmann: Oh yeah.

Hannah Weisman: ... that was not something I had to do at museums, but now I can find a book in Cutter or Library of Congress Classification.

Philip Dallmann: Hey, that's fantastic.

Hannah Weisman: Yes.

Philip Dallmann: That's not something I could do. I mean that's really, really interesting and you think .. Yeah, like how do you go and curate the topics when you have such a wealth to go through. And it's not necessarily set up in the way that it's like, oh, here's the galleries that we built from there. We're building from what I assume, is it an established collection or is it growing or?

Hannah Weisman: It is an established collection that is still growing.

Philip Dallmann: Okay.

Hannah Weisman: So we have both open shelf that are one of the benefits of membership is borrowing privileges, just like any circulating library. And then we also have special collections, so that's rare books, works on paper, paintings and sculpture. And so a lot of my work is around the special collections and giving people access to them. And while most museums don't have the majority of their collections on view at any given time, in the library it's even more dramatic. Almost everything that we have is in a locked storage space most of the time. We do have exhibitions, but. that's not our primary function.

Hannah Weisman: So trying to come up with programmatic ways to get people in front of collections and thinking about them in different ways. We do a program that we call, "I have the expert," and we do it on different themes every season so that a group of colleagues, it's usually three colleagues at a time, have a common theme and they pull out different items from the collection that fit that theme and then they do a story. It's usually about a one hour program, but it gives our members and visitors a chance to see things in the collection that they would

never otherwise even know was there. Because when you have a collection of almost 500,000 things, that one person on the street who comes to the library primarily to read mystery novels is not necessarily going to know that you have a 16th century book on the classification of species.

Philip Dallmann: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah. That is fair. You touched on it a little bit at the top, obviously as as a membership organization with a fee. What are some of the, I guess, hurdles to to access around that that, that you guys have to navigate?

Hannah Weisman: The first is that we know our fee is cost prohibitive for some people. It costs \$525 a year for a household to join the library, and then there are lower rates for individuals, and then lower rates for individuals or families of patrons who are 35 or younger.

Philip Dallmann: Okay.

Hannah Weisman: So we do have a few different price points, but that is something we're exploring is sort of how do we take away this barrier. The other challenge we have is that fee and the history of our organization as a predominantly white organization and one that's predominantly white and wealthy, is helping share the message that we actually want people of all backgrounds in the library and that we are open for business to everyone. It is a culture shift for us that we're at the beginning of, I think. And I think here at LEAD we're talking primarily around access for people with disabilities.

Hannah Weisman: But I think that access for people with disabilities is part of the bigger question of access for people of all backgrounds. And that when we think about diversity, equity, access and inclusion, the lessons that we learned about creating accessible spaces for people with disabilities translate almost exactly to the same kinds of initiatives we need for creating access for people of different racial backgrounds, of people of different ages, people with gender diversity. So as we start to think about what is truly universal design and what does it mean to think in terms of inclusive design and universal access, the lessons we learned here at LEAD help us make our organization more accessible for people with disabilities, as well as people of all backgrounds.

Philip Dallmann: That was the best plug for LEAD ever. If any of the Kennedy Center folks are listening to this episode, just go ahead and quote that, tweet that. Because that's gold. As always, for those of us who live in the cultural field, we don't always get to dream our dreams. So I always like to [inaudible 00:16:07] say, as Betty says, safe space, to dream your dreams. I'd love, and you touched on it again a little bit, but I'd love to hear from you what you hope for the future of the library or the Athenaeum to call its proper name, and things of that nature in general.

Hannah Weisman: My hope for the Athenaeum would be that it really truly become a center of discourse for the city of Boston, and be reflective of the demographics and of the people who make up the city of Boston. It has a really rich history of being a place for intellectual pursuits and people who are interested in knowledge and learning. And I think it has the potential to be a really important space in the city for engaging in important conversations about what makes our world and what role arts and culture play in our society. And my dream would be for us to realize that potential.

Philip Dallmann: That's fantastic. I support that 100%. Well thank you again for taking the time to chat. Thank you for all of the work that you're doing and thank you for being an Access Champion.

Hannah Weisman: Thank you so much.

Philip Dallmann: Thanks again to Hannah for coming on by to our pop-up studio at the LEAD Conference this summer. Just want to reiterate, it was such a blast, we had so much fun. And it was so great that some [inaudible 00:17:39] came by and we learned more and more about structure and process and just a great time. So thank you to everybody that popped in, pun very much intended. And I'll give an early, usually she's later in the thank you's, but a quick thank you to Kelsey again, Miss Kelsey Rose Brown, our associate producer, for all the work that she did with us in Denver. It was invaluable.

Philip Dallmann: Thank you as always to our executive producer Matt Kerstetter for making this sound great each and every single week and teaching me how to use my equipment properly. Thank you to our champion intern, Savannah Cooper. Thank you to our logo designer, Mr. Tommy Karr. Thank you to our theme song composer, the Eric Walton. We'll be back again next week and remember Inclusion Believers, never stop running through that brick wall.