

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. We've got another great episode for you guys this week. We have, I think it's our third ever returning guest, Sofiya Cheyenne, of the previous episode. I believe it was The Amazing Human. Sofiya Cheyenne joins us, and it was just a really great conversation, a great catch up. It's been way too long in between conversations on air and off air, for that matter. So it was just so good to hear about all the amazing work that she's been doing in both as an artist, but also in the world of activism. So really, really excited to share that with you guys.

Philip D.: This week a continued conversation about myths and words with Sofiya is our Patreon exclusive. So really excited to share that conversation with you guys. I think it's really informative. A lot of things I didn't know as it related to dwarf culture and the history of little people and certain words and certain events. So really, really interesting stuff. Really excited to share that with you guys as well on Patreon, which you can sign up for for just \$1 a month at patreon.com/accesschampions.

Philip D.: What this is is a way for you to support the podcast fiscally, again, for as little as \$1 a month. We have different levels above that, but \$1 a month, you get access to all the exclusive content and a sticker. Other levels, there's t-shirts, mugs, on air shout-outs, et cetera, et cetera, and so forth. You know, we talked about last week, we have listeners well into the thousands, and unfortunately way less than that on Patreon. And unfortunately this podcast, it does operate at a loss, and as much as we can do to fix that as we strive to be as inclusive as possible with not just the time that's put in, but the equipment and transcriptions and so forth, and as we dive into piloting ASL videos for the episodes. All of this does have a dollar sign attached to it, unfortunately, and so we do need as much support as possible on Patreon. Last week we did release our first ever full interview on Patreon, and we do need as much support as possible, again, for all of those accessibility and inclusion efforts.

Philip D.: Last week we did release our first ever full interview on Patreon, exclusively on Patreon, with Elizabeth Ralston. We call it Equity in the Pacific Northwest. A really dope conversation about the efforts that she's had going on out there in the Seattle area and the amazing work that she's been doing. And then again this week, the Patreon exclusive is with Sofiya and just really an interesting look at words and myths.

Philip D.: So that's that on Patreon. Again, patreon.com/accesschampions. If you don't already, go ahead and give us a follow on social media. We're @accesschampion on Twitter and Instagram, and the Access Champion Podcast on Facebook. Lots of great content curated by our Champion intern Savannah Cooper and associate producer Miss Kelsey Rose Brown. Just again as I always say, quality over quantity. So give us a follow if you don't already.

Philip D.: And I believe that's that. So without further ado, returning Access Champion, Sofiya Cheyenne.

Philip D.: All right, and we are here with our, I think I figured out, our third ever returning guest, and one of our earliest interviews, Sofiya Cheyenne. Thanks for taking the time to chat.

Sofiya C.: Thank you so much for having me. I am so happy to be back here with you.

Philip D.: And you are only our second guest to do an interview in this office studio, the official Access Champion office studio.

Sofiya C.: Yes. I like it. Big window right here in front of me. It's very nice.

Philip D.: Yeah, it's nice. I tried. We've got some greenery, there's some gin in the background. All the things you need.

Sofiya C.: Wow. I didn't even notice that until just now.

Philip D.: Listen, the podcast takes a lot out of me.

Sofiya C.: Right. It's a lot of hard work for sure.

Philip D.: So we were just chatting before we hit record and I was thinking, I was like, oh, where did we leave off? And it was more than a year ago, and now this will be episode 77, which is unbelievable to think about, and exhausting to think about. As I'm sure our producer Matt is listening to this and also feels exhausted by that. But when we left it, you were about to head off to the LPA or Little People of America Conference and continue working on a very specific project.

Sofiya C.: Yes.

Philip D.: What's happened since?

Sofiya C.: Yeah. That is really a great way to start today, so thank you for that. We had an incredible turnout that summer. I believe it was two conferences ago. So I'm the chair of the Dwarf Artist Coalition, which is a committee in Little People of America, and I've really been taking that role on seriously, and it's really paid off.

Sofiya C.: So when we went to the conference that summer, we did a project called Telephone. And Telephone was a huge success. There were tons of people that were interested once they saw the performances and read the poems and heard the songs that people had created. And since then we have continued to do Telephone. So this summer in 2020, which is so weird to say, we will have like over 15 performers or artists which will do a varying of visual art, music, dance, spoken word, all sorts of different mediums, and it's all inspired by each other. So a lot of the times, Telephone has become a creative arts project that we kind of talk about dwarf identity.

Philip D.: Okay.

Sofiya C.: And it's been really exciting because it's purely from someone who has dwarfism, and we are sharing it with the dwarfism community, which includes average height parents and siblings. So it's been a really beautiful way for us to share our identity with the community at large.

Sofiya C.: And then outside of that, I think that we're also just creating a really great artist community in the dwarfism community. Because LPA, Little People of America, has done a lot of initiatives to create community obviously, but the arts have not really been a part of it, or they kind of just are on the sidelines.

Sofiya C.: And so since I came on, our last event, I mean, I had over 150 people show up to one of my events.

Philip D.: Oh wow.

Sofiya C.: And so obviously people want to see art, people want to share that creative experience, and it's really turned out to be so fantastic. And I'm so proud of the artists that have been a part of it, and I'm just so happy that people are asking. So the more we do things, the more we're asked of, and it's just been such an incredible journey in that way.

Philip D.: That's fantastic.

Sofiya C.: Yeah.

Philip D.: And what tremendous growth in like a year's time. Like, unreal.

Sofiya C.: Yeah.

Philip D.: I think it really does speak to exactly what you were saying, there was a thirst for it.

Sofiya C.: Yeah.

Philip D.: And a need. And that's so exciting. [inaudible 00:08:48].

Sofiya C.: Yeah. Thank you.

Philip D.: I've noticed from afar sort of an increase in the world of activism, or your work in the world of activism. What has that been like?

Sofiya C.: Yeah. I think that because I took on that chair position for the Dwarf Artist Coalition, it really pushed me to be an organizer.

Philip D.: Okay.

Sofiya C.: And I was very excited about what that made me feel. Because when the DAC, that's Dwarf Artist Coalition. We do a lot of acronyms, LPA, DAC, LPAP. It's all a whole lot of stuff. But when I took on the DAC and I saw its growth going from 5 artists to 10 artists to now 15 artists, and having from 30 people to show up to 150 people show up, I felt like there is a calling here, and so I want to be an organizer more. So I've been trying to do that not only in LPA, but in the world, and in my life.

Sofiya C.: And that really falls so perfectly this month, which is Dwarfism Awareness Month. October is a month of many awarenesses.

Philip D.: I feel like many months have. There's only 12 months in the year.

Sofiya C.: Yeah.

Philip D.: So I feel like everybody's like, well, we've got to land on one of them.

Sofiya C.: Yeah. That's true.

Philip D.: So let's try not to conflict with something too similar, but yeah.

Sofiya C.: Right, right.

Philip D.: It's funny.

Sofiya C.: And so October has always been that month where I've really pushed and lean into that activism role more and more, creating videos on YouTube and talking about really important subjects that are important to me. Like about how little people are treated everyday on the street, which is a really hard experience. We combat a lot of ignorance in this world. People often are pointing or staring or laughing or want to take a picture or like jump over us or pet us. It can help you create a thick skin, you know? And so the more I started being a leader in the community, the more I felt like I really want to push this activism button and do it more so. So, yeah.

Philip D.: So what are some of the things that you, as an activist, and as you've been sort of engaging specifically in this month, that you're trying to bring awareness to within dwarf culture?

Sofiya C.: Great. Yeah, since then I've been going to schools and doing assemblies or classroom workshops, incorporating theater as a way to learn about ourselves and teach kids self awareness and self identity, and also telling my story as a little person in those schools and bringing an anti bullying lens into the schools.

Sofiya C.: So I've been trying to go to schools more and do assemblies and teach kids about how to choose kindness and lead with respect. And it's okay to be curious, but we need to do that in a respectful way. As well as going out there and leading conferences and

organizations in the conversation of inclusion, and how little people, we are really the last marginalized group that it's okay to discriminate. Or at least that's how our community feels, because obviously like every race or every marginalized group has their own fight they're fighting, but it seems like every other community kind of gets that attention. Whereas the little person community is still having trouble fighting that fight.

Sofiya C.: I mean, there's so many activists out there that I look up to and I try to follow their lead, but we are still struggling to be seen as our full selves. And so that's why I'm so passionate about being an activist and sharing my story, and really starting with the kids and the youth and going into schools. Because if we can start there, then I think that we can really make good change.

Philip D.: Absolutely. I 100% agree with that. I think if you're exposed to things in a classroom, exposed to individuals different than yourself, then it doesn't become other, right? It becomes just part of your community and part of your, I don't know, what's the word? I mean just in your head, it's not special. It's just these are other humans. Again, it leads into the common humanity, right?

Sofiya C.: Right. Yeah. It's back to if you kind of desensitize that stigma or that stereotype, you're really going to help everybody move forward. And so when I do these assemblies at schools, I show them my scooter and my stool and my reacher, and I explain to them, this is how I operate in this world because these things aren't built for me. But there's nothing scary or weird about that, and quite honestly, you could probably use a stool too. Everybody could use a stool in their life.

Philip D.: Absolutely.

Sofiya C.: You know?

Philip D.: So the first time I think you and I met, I was helping coordinate this panel.

Sofiya C.: Yes.

Philip D.: And I honestly, while I had met other little people, I hadn't really planned anything around that accessibility-wise. And you introduced me to the idea and need of a stool at that event, and it stuck with me. And as I was prepping for today, I was prepared. The Access Champion case that we carry all of our equipment in.

Sofiya C.: I see it right there.

Philip D.: Is the perfect height, I believe, with these chairs, to operate as a pseudo-stool. So when I was planning out, I was like, if she doesn't bring her stool, I've got one ready. I'm ready to go. But it's not something I would've been aware of until, honestly, we had a very just typical conversation about-

Sofiya C.: Right.

Philip D.: You're like, oh yeah, stools. And I'm like, oh yeah. No. Logically that makes 100% sense.

Sofiya C.: Yeah.

Philip D.: But I think again, those are things that if you're exposed to at a young age. I think growing up, I really wasn't exposed to the world of disability at all until much, much later in life. I think I met one woman with cerebral palsy in our school, but it was a time of very separate.

Sofiya C.: Yeah. And I think that really the key in that learning is to help see the similarities in all of us, not the differences. When I talk to kids or adults or any students, I am trying to show them that I am similar to them, not that I am different than them. And I think that once we can truly switch that thinking to seeing that, like, oh, I have brown eyes and curly hair, who else has brown eyes and curly hair in this room? You know? And how can we actually see the similarities that we have with each other? Because that is how we can really grow and change, by seeing that we are more alike than we think we are.

Philip D.: Again, 1000%. And I think that's become a recurring conversation that I've clocked over, I don't know, probably the last six months on the podcast with a variety of guests with a variety of different backgrounds, is that idea of just like common humanity. We're all just baseline. We're all human.

Sofiya C.: And we're all just trying to live our lives and find things that we're happy about and live this life just like anybody else would, you know? Yeah.

Philip D.: Absolutely. So right after we spoke last time, I believe you were headed down to the Hobby Center down in Houston. Shout out, Judi Stallings, fan of the podcast, and friend of the podcast. For a production of Guys and Dolls.

Sofiya C.: Yes, that is correct.

Philip D.: Tell me a little bit about that.

Sofiya C.: Sure. So Guys and Dolls really opened up a lot of doors for me, and I am super, super grateful for the creative team that I had met there. And it really, really was a big impactful experience. So I played Big Jule, Big Julie, in Guys and Dolls, which is typically been played by a very tall man. And we did the show, obviously they were playing with size as a fun, creative, comedic moment, but also to kind of teach that strength and power can be seen in lots of different ways. And I really think it was a success. I think that the show was a success. I think that it was doing exactly what it was intended to do. But at the same time it was quite a challenging experience for me, to be honest, because I was stepping into a role that is typically played a certain way.

Sofiya C.: And so in that vein, the all the actors on stage, as well as the creative team, as we were rehearsing, had to really think and choose wisely how we were going to tell that story. And I think that ultimately we came up with something really creative and fun, and it was a growing experience for me as an actor because I had to self advocate a lot during that experience. You know, some things they were trying to just do the butt of the joke, which a lot of little people fall under a lot. And I was like, you know what? I don't think that that's a funny choice, or I think that we can make it funny in a different way.

Sofiya C.: And so I had to really speak up for myself, I had to advocate for myself. And that's challenging when you're a young actress and you just want a job, and you just want to do a good job and tell a fun story. But there is a responsibility I feel like I hold when I'm in those spaces, and I want the other directors and casting directors to see me and say, you know what? We could hire a little person for that role, even if it's not about size, because they are talented or they have this training or whatever. You know?

Philip D.: Yeah, absolutely. And, one, good on you for taking ownership of that.

Sofiya C.: Thanks. It was hard.

Philip D.: Well, it's hard. And you're right, you are a young actress and you've been cast in a role, and you want to be cast again, and you don't want to be seen as a problem.

Sofiya C.: Exactly.

Philip D.: But you do innately feel responsibility to your community, and I think that's something a lot of people, especially in underserved or underrepresented demographics feel an obligation to their community. Or sometimes they don't want to feel that, sometimes they just want to do the job. And I feel like I've heard a lot of conversations recently on both ends.

Sofiya C.: And I think that when I left Houston, Texas, that the whole Hobby Center definitely learned something from me. You know, from the costume shop, to the backstage crew, to the audience, I really think that I made my mark. And I told them, you know what? It would be great if you could put a hook there for us littles. And if I had to sit down during rehearsal, like I'm here, I'm present, I just need to sit and give my legs a break for a second. And just teaching that that's an inclusive way to go about this rehearsal process or a different way we can approach this show, I think that everybody took something from that.

Philip D.: Absolutely.

Sofiya C.: Yeah.

Philip D.: And I love Guys and Dolls. I was in Guys and Dolls Junior in the seventh grade. I was a great Benny Southstreet. Our producer Matt Kerstetter was Nathan Lane. It was a production not to be missed. Or definitely missed. One of the two.

Sofiya C.: And I have to say that being the woman on stage singing Luck Be A Lady with all the guys was a really fun different spin, you know? And it was like Big Julie is a woman in a man's world, and what does that look like, too?

Philip D.: Oh yeah. Because you're playing not only with, again, the size differential, but gender as well.

Sofiya C.: Yeah. Yeah. So I think it really proved to work very well on the show, and it was a huge success. I had a great time.

Philip D.: And then after that you headed on down to the Shakespeare Theatre.

Sofiya C.: I did. So I then got a role as the mayor of London in Richard III. Obviously Richard III is a character with a disability, and the Shakespeare Theatre Company did not cast an actor with a disability for Richard III. But I was the person with a disability in that show. So we had an interesting, yet again, experience of self advocacy, and bringing that inclusive awareness to the team. I think that show was a huge success. It was really beautifully done, directed, and choreographed. But once again, I was put in a position to self advocate and to be a voice for people like me in the rooms.

Sofiya C.: And I really think that it did pay off. I had a blast, and Washington DC was such a great city to perform in. We were in the thick of winter, so it was cold. But yeah, I had a great time. And that again was a power play in that story as the mayor of London in the scene with Richard when he basically shows the mayor a head and is like, you want this to happen to you? No, I don't think you do. You should do what I say. And so it was a power play both in size, with gender, and all those kinds of things, and it was really fun to do.

Sofiya C.: So I'm excited and grateful that I have the opportunity to kind of push the envelope in that way in the shows that I do. I think any show that I do has had to kind of force some sort of inclusive storyline.

Philip D.: Absolutely. And you're using your employment for good, essentially. Which is my very smart segue to the other awareness month that it is this month, is Disability Employment Awareness Month, which I'll say I wasn't even aware of.

Sofiya C.: Yes.

Philip D.: But go ahead and go.

Sofiya C.: Yeah, yeah. No, it's Disability Employment Awareness Month. D-E-A-M, DEAM, is what some people it.

Philip D.: We're really missing the R. They should have figured out a way to put R in there and then it could be DREAMS.

Sofiya C.: Right? Oh my God, that would have been perfect. We'll have to think on that later.

Philip D.: Yeah, tell them to work on that.

Sofiya C.: But yeah. And actually my husband, Clinton Brown, who works in finance for cable company called Altice, he's been doing a lot of initiatives for disability employment. And really what that means to me is about how there is an untapped workforce, and I feel like people that listen to this podcast totally, totally get it. But the untapped workforce of people with disabilities that don't get hired for jobs because I think that companies are afraid to think of things differently or they just don't want to be wrong about how to address that situation. Which is so natural and so normal, I think, for lack of a better word.

Sofiya C.: But I do think that it's an important awareness campaign. Because what we need to talk about is what I think is missing in our world. When a person with a disability goes to school, whether they finish high school or they finish college, that transition period from being in a school that's kind of safe and has resources for you, if you're someone that's blind or hard of hearing or has a physical disability or a cognitive disability, what are those resources that you get when you're in school? And then when you graduate, you're just kicked into the real world, and those resources aren't there for you. And so when you have to go into the workforce, it's like, how do you ask for those things? And that's what's really hard. So I think that it's important to talk about these things, especially this month, Disability Employment Awareness Month.

Philip D.: Yeah, absolutely.

Sofiya C.: Yeah.

Philip D.: And I'll shout out our episode one guests, which was Eliza Greenberg and Alison Mahoney, and the Supporting Transitions program, which now Katie Fanning has joined and replaced Alison, as Alison has moved off to Ireland sadly. We miss her dearly in this city already.

Sofiya C.: We miss you.

Philip D.: But they're doing very specific work in the world of disability employment in the world of cultural institutions and supporting the those transitions, as you say.

Sofiya C.: Yeah, that transition period is so important, and I think that that's where we are lacking. And if there's anyone that's, obviously you just gave a shout out, that's what we need to work on for employment to help our community, and for the organizations and the corporate structures that exist to see that there is a way that we can accommodate. I mean, my husband stands 3'3". He's worked in corporate America for a really long time. And he's managed at a regular desk with whatever accommodations he's needed, and it's worked. So there's a way to make it work.

Philip D.: Oh, 1000%.

Sofiya C.: It's just not being afraid to be wrong, and to kind of make mistakes and learn, right?

Philip D.: I'll throw back. In my first year at TDF, I was hired a month before Christina Trevino, who's now their associate director of digital strategy, and we were all getting ready for the Christmas party. And all of a sudden the office manager, who was in charge of planning, went, wait a second, I'm pretty sure the space is upstairs and there's no elevator. And it was fine. We changed spaces. The company was like, great, we're going to go somewhere else. But it was one of those moments where like, oh yeah, swing and a miss. We weren't thinking about accommodating someone who's a wheelchair user because they hadn't ever before. But they had hired someone who was incredibly qualified for a certain position.

Philip D.: And I clock that as a moment of like, oh yeah. Great. I'm glad you guys didn't make it a big deal.

Sofiya C.: That's good.

Philip D.: You just made the adjustment.

Sofiya C.: Yeah. I mean, you took that situation and you said, oh, big boobo. Whoops. Let's fix that. And you do, because you have to, because it's important. And the amount of times that people with disabilities feel not heard, unseen, or not cared for, the skew is off. You know? It happens way too often. So the workplaces that we work in need to help us feel that support and those resources too.

Philip D.: 1000%. And I think, also, I'd love to see more, well, I'd love to see more HR departments in organizations, but I'd love to see current HR folks really dive into this world and have a true understanding of this and hold the folks who are in charge of hiring accountable as they are potentially dismissive because of perceived needs.

Philip D.: Because I also often think, man, if you don't ask somebody what they need, they may not need the 45 things that you've made up in your head.

Sofiya C.: 100%. 100%.

Philip D.: Yeah. Because you don't actually have a conversation, how do you know what the individual who is deaf actually needs on a day to day basis?

Sofiya C.: Right.

Philip D.: You know?

Sofiya C.: Yeah. And I'm going to steal something out of my husband's book, too. Shout out to Clinton Brown. But what he talks about a lot, especially in this conversation about employment, is that just like anybody, when you have a job, you feel like you have a purpose. You feel like you belong to something. And if you like your job, it's even better, right?

Philip D.: Yes.

Sofiya C.: So I think that when we think about it like that, that we all to be somewhere where we feel purposeful, or where we feel like we belong, or like we're making an impact. Even if it's punching numbers into an Excel spreadsheet. Whatever it is, if that's your purpose, that's where you belong, everyone deserves to feel that way. And I think that that is what Disability Employment Awareness Month means to me. You know?

Philip D.: Yes, yes. I mean, I think we all deserve that. I think it's something every human tries for in the world of employment is to feel that purpose and to feel that sense of belonging. And unfortunately, I think more people don't have it than do. And I think that's something we can all look at and reflect on. Like, what are we doing? Do we feel like this is moving forward our personal missions and how we want to change the world in either a tiny way or a big way? Not to get too existential on it.

Sofiya C.: No, but you could, right? Because it is. It's deep. It's deep stuff. When you're told, sorry, can't hire you, over and over again. I mean, it's deep stuff. There's a lot. What is under that that is not helping us move forward? You know? I like to get into the psychology thing.

Philip D.: Yeah.

Sofiya C.: It can really get a little much.

Philip D.: Well, first of all, we need to not go another full year and a half between having you on the podcast in any capacity.

Philip D.: I should also note at the top that Sofiya is, I think I mentioned on last week's episode, Sofiya is part of our board slash steering committee now.

Sofiya C.: Yes.

Philip D.: Bringing a wonderful perspective to everything we do as this podcast tries to grow and be more inclusive and reach more people. And I'm very, very grateful for all that you've done.

Sofiya C.: I'm very grateful to know you, Phil, and to work with you, and collaborate, and share ideas and grow together. I love this podcast. I'm a huge fan. So y'all better get on your

Patreon and get on that social media, because there's a lot of swag I'm looking at right now around the room. It's pretty sweet.

Philip D.: It is, right? And as always shout out to Miss Kelsey Rose Brown, who designs pretty much all of it.

Sofiya C.: It's great. It's great.

Philip D.: It's not my background.

Sofiya C.: But I'm happy to share my story with you, and just bring that awareness. It makes me feel like I'm doing my part, so I'm happy to help.

Philip D.: Well, I would say you're absolutely doing your part. So thank you for all that you do, because we just rattled off quite a bit.

Sofiya C.: We did.

Philip D.: And I think it's amazing. I'm constantly amazed. And thank you, as always, for being an Access Champion.

Sofiya C.: Thanks, Phil.

Philip D.: Thanks again, Sofiya, for taking the time to chat and coming on down to the studio proper, and really just a wonderful conversation, and so wonderful to catch up with you. And I don't know if I mentioned it in the interview, but thank you also for all that you do on the podcast board as well.

Philip D.: Thank you, as always, to our executive producer, Matt Kerstetter, for making us sound great each and every single week. Thank you to our associate producer, Miss Kelsey Rose Brown, for all that she does. Thank you to the one and only Savannah Cooper for all the work that she does across social media as our Champion intern. Thank you to Tommy Carr for that logo. Thank you to Eric Walton for the work done on our theme song.

Philip D.: We'll be back again next week, and remember, inclusion believers, never stop running through that brick wall.