

Intro: [music 00:00:02]

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 got another great episode for you guys this week. The final sit down that we had when we sat down with a bunch of the folks from the Museum, Arts and Cultural Accessibility Consortium here in New York, otherwise known as MAC. We're sitting down with Alex Delare who, at the time, was the education associate, but now is the associate director of education at New York City's Children's Theater. So clearly on the come up doing big things over there, and just a really wonderful conversation. And actually shout out to Alex because she really helped coordinate all of the interviews that we had previously with the other members of MAC, like Meredith Wong and Olivia Jones and Beth Prevor. All great. And I'm sure we'll have other MAC members on the show going forward.

Philip D.: Speaking of Beth Prevor, Beth and her company Hands On are helping us as we dive into the world of ASL interpreted videos of our podcast. We are slowly building out an advisory committee, so if you do take in the podcast and are an ASL user and are interested in helping us make sure we do this thing correctly and in the most effective way possible, please reach out to us at accesschampion@gmail.com. Again that's accesschampion@gmail.com, we'd love to chat and receive your feedback on what we're trying to do in our continued efforts to make this podcast the most accessible podcast in the universe. Jumping off that, we have an exclusive Patreon interview once again this week from our public studio in Denver. We have a group from Boston sitting down with associate producer, Miss Kelsey Rose Brown.

Philip D.: Representatives from Wheelock Family Theater, Open Door Theater and the Boston Aquarium sit down with Kelsey and chat about all awesome things happening in Boston. Which is great because Kelsey lives in Boston, so she can speak to that city much, much better than I can, so don't miss out. You can listen to that interview and previous interviews, exclusive ones such as last week's Kat Germain with Weescription, the audio description for children happening up in Canada, which is amazing. Our sit down with Elizabeth Ralston who is doing an incredible workout in the Seattle area. We had a game show with the Constitution Center. Sophia Cheyenne and I just dove in on the history of dwarfism and language and just dissected it. So there's just so much dope content we're putting out there on Patreon, and you guys can have access to it for as little as \$1 a month. We are trying to put stuff out there.

Philip D.: We are hoping that you guys will consider supporting us for \$1. You get all that content plus a sticker. You guys have heard the spiel. There's also lots of other swag and benefits and things like that for higher levels of support. But we're trying to make the thing happen. We're trying to be along the same lines as the ASL videos. We're trying to be the most inclusive podcast possible and there are expenses involved, and we're really hoping that this Patreon and will help

underwrite some of that as we move forward. And we are moving forward with that, and I am so grateful for all of the Patreon supporters out there that we have so far. But again, if you are listening and you're thinking about it, please do consider dedicating \$1 a month to supporting this podcast. We greatly appreciate it.

Philip D.: As always, make sure you're following us on Instagram, Twitter and Facebook. We're @AccessChampion, just Google Access Champion, we're really the only ones out there, and you'll find us. Great content as always curated by our champion intern Savannah Cooper and our associate producer, Miss Kelsey Rose Brown. Just really, really great stuff. One of the things that I haven't said on here in a while, and I want to make sure that all of you guys remember this, we're always open to suggestions about topics and guests. And send us articles and memes and tag us in things. It's really wonderful. I love when things are organic in that way. So across social media, again, we're @AccessChampion, but also feel free to email us accesschampion@gmail.com, I'm really always down to chat. And I think that's that. So without further ado, Access Champion, Alex Delare.

Philip D.: All right. And we are here with Alex Delare, the education associate at New York City Children's Theater. Thanks for taking the time to chat.

Alex Delare: Of course Philip, it's my pleasure.

Philip D.: So my favorite thing about today is, and this is to note being recorded in a session of all MAC steering committee members, back to back to back, which is really exciting. But including Meredith, who we just interviewed seconds ago. All folks I don't actually know. And that's the beautiful thing about New York State and New York City access is that I'm always discovering somebody new doing incredible work. So I'm so excited, we had emails back and forth, but I'm so excited to sit down and learn about you and your work. Because our mutual friend, colleague, Becky Liefman spoke so highly of everything you're doing. But I'd love to hear a little bit about your journey. How did you end up in this field?

Alex Delare: Absolutely. Well I feel like... So I work, as you mentioned, at New York City Children's Theater and originally I was an actor, so that's where the theater landing happened for me. But before I actually worked in museums, so I actually got my start in the accessibility world and really an education through working at the lower East side Tenement Museum.

Philip D.: Okay.

Alex Delare: So have you ever been there?

Philip D.: I have.

Alex Delare: You have.

Philip D.: Yes.

Alex Delare: Well then for any of the listeners who are, in case you don't remember Phil, it's a tenement building, an old building. So essentially it can be really hard to be super accessible. Just the nature of it. Part of the experience in many ways for visitors is walking through this really old building and seeing how immigrants and migrants once lived. So one perfect example of trickiness with access is for a very long time the only exhibits that you could see were inside the tenement building via staircase. So creating accessible tours for a very long time was challenging, and I was very lucky to really learn how access worked and really what access looked like through a member of the MAC steering committee, which maybe you'll interview at some point. She's incredible. She's one of these access champions. Her name is Ellysheva Zeira, and she really has found really amazing ways to think about, how can you do access on a space that, and to some degree like I said, is really hard to make accessible.

Alex Delare: Yeah. I mean there's just structural hurdles every step of the way there, pun not intended. But when you're dealing with landmark status in a lot of ways because you can't physically alter the building. Yeah, I know that all too well. And I feel like it's something that's exclusive to a lot of major cities where they have these historical landmarks that you want to make accessible for everyone. And frankly, you want the patronage of everyone even from a terribly capitalistic perspective. But people want to come and see this museum. But yeah, so that's a heck of a way to dive into access.

Alex Delare: Totally. And I was lucky enough to be asked to join their access committee, which really gave me an amazing outlet and way to really see how Ellysheva was really doing that work. So through that we were able to take some of the tours that myself, as a senior educator, was already doing. And think about, okay, if I'm doing this tour for this population, what can I do to best serve them? So it was really thinking about, what are touch objects or other terms? Are like sensory objects that we have that we have access to that we then can use. So even though many of the apartments in the building you cannot physically touch because they're actual items from those time periods, we can give them objects so they can feel, for example, many visitors want to feel the walls. And after we're describing them they want to actually feel them.

Alex Delare: Whether those visitors are blind or low vision, or just general visitors just want to see them, they want to feel the texture. So one of the first tours I got to give and lead when I was doing that was actually for a group with blind and low vision. And so I gave a tour I'd been giving for, I guess three years at that point, but using these very specific sensory entryways with them. And it just really changed my whole viewing of these amazing tours that we give, but seeing them through this whole other lens. And it just was so empowering. I also played one of the residents who lived in that particular apartment, so I was always constantly thinking about what her worldview was like. We know her name is Bridgette Moore. She was an Irish immigrant that lived in the building.

Alex Delare: We know that she really loved coming into New York and figuring out what her home would look like and making a home, but the challenges that she faced along the way. So we talk a lot about how her husband would go into maybe a bar perhaps and hear music that was not things that would make him feel safe or welcome. So we play for many visitors a song called No Irish Need Apply, and I didn't have access to the actual recording. So I realized, why don't I just sing it to them? So I sang it on the tour and it was just, we had closed up the entire building, so the whole building was really quiet. And we were just in this really small apartment together and the whole building was lit practically by candlelight, even though that was the light of electricity.

Alex Delare: But from the building it felt very low lighting. And we sang the song together, and the visitors were like, I felt like we were in this bar. I felt like we were in the space where this family worked. And I feel like my experience was so mutual to there's, we felt like we were all there. So I think that journey of being at that museum really took me to this place where I really want to do more of this work. And having these amazing access champions to help me get there was really a way to sort of find my footing in this world.

Philip D.: That's fantastic. What a wonderfully immersive experience you are cultivating there.

Alex Delare: Totally.

Philip D.: With the idea of access. I mean, for anyone that's a wonderful experience. And as you said, the sort of tactile aspect, many folks, neuro diverse, blind and low vision, or neuro-typical, are sensory seeking. And that just enhances the experience tenfold. You know?

Alex Delare: Absolutely. Absolutely.

Philip D.: So you're at the Tenement Museum. What's the jump from there to New York City Children's Theater?

Alex Delare: Absolutely. So I kind of hopped one more time.

Philip D.: Okay.

Alex Delare: right after that I then moved on to the 9/11 Memorial and Museum.

Philip D.: Okay.

Alex Delare: And I was there as an education specialist. And some of my favorite tours, again, we're working with very diverse populations. And we also saw a lot of visitors who probably not surprisingly lived through the attacks or had very personal connections, whether they were just here in New York or potentially lost

someone that day. And I would often have visitors sharing these very powerful stories with me, and that work, even though it's different in many ways than the access world and disability community, it was finding a way in to tell stories. And finding a new way to work with just a different population. Many of them I don't think would've called it trauma, but certainly talking to them it certainly felt that way. So working in that world and working with different visitors and different views really started leading me to think about how could I bring in education and storytelling in a different way. And through all these access connections I was really lucky to then find out about Sarah Margolis. Who I know you've met before through ActionPlay.

Philip D.: She was featured on the podcast. Yes. One of our favorite episodes with Aaron Feinstein and Ben Dworkin. And Sarah is just an absolute champion. But taking a step back to the 9/11 Museum, another one of my favorite folks in access is Emmanuel von Schack.

Alex Delare: Oh my God, I know. He's the best. I love Emmanuel.

Philip D.: And we're going to get him on the podcast soon.

Alex Delare: I would love to hear you talk to him. I would love that.

Philip D.: It's weird to say that I love that museum. I have only been once, which I feel like is the quota for a lot of people, but it was a tremendous experience. And they've done an amazing, amazing job down there, and their access programs, again, Emmanuel is leading the charge and doing the thing.

Alex Delare: He's just so amazing. I was so lucky. We actually shared desk space together [crosstalk 00:14:03] the whole time I was there. So he was my desk mate. And we would always talk about, you know, when I was giving a tour, I loved being able to hear when he was giving a tour himself. And just hear like, oh, how is he putting things together? How is he creating different exhibits at the museum? And it just absolutely awoken my different ways of thinking about any museum. And he's now the director of access there, and he's just doing incredible things for that museum. I feel like they're just so incredibly lucky to have him. And just his work in cultural organizations is just unbelievable. He's so inspiring.

Philip D.: Absolutely. New York City is lucky to have him.

Alex Delare: Absolutely.

Philip D.: I feel that often when I interact with MAC members and the MAC steering committee. I'm like, God, this city is very lucky that we've just grabbed all these... It was the same way when I was in Chicago with the CCAC. I was like, all of these guys, like it's so good and this city is so lucky to have all these people. So anyway, the love fest on Emmanuel is done, to be picked up at a later date.

Alex Delare: It doesn't have to be.

Philip D.: So you're at the the 9/11 Museum and then stark transition.

Alex Delare: [inaudible 00:15:10] transition.

Philip D.: I thought the Tenement Museum and New York City Children's Theater was stark, but all right. So you head over to the New York City Children's Theater.

Alex Delare: Absolutely.

Philip D.: Through Sarah Margolis?

Alex Delare: Absolutely. So because of all these access contacts I had built over time, particularly through like Ellysheva, is that amazing starting point of the Tenement Museum and ended up really taking off until then meeting Sarah. And when we met it was just like, oh I get it. Like this is such a beautiful way to connect my history as a former actor, and also all the education work I've been doing. And as of course you know, she's such an incredible access proponent that our conversations immediately turned into just this incredible passion for the work that she was doing and work that I was doing. And how could we kind of manifest this all together and work together at the organization? So it's just the two of us in education. She's the director of education, which she's been now for a year at New York City Children's Theater and we work together. And we just have the most incredible time throwing ideas together and thinking about how we can keep building our department of education for the future, particularly when thinking about access.

Philip D.: And what is the current state of access at New York City Children's Theater?

Alex Delare: I mean, well before I started, Sarah actually created an amazing touring musical that we take to schools called Five, because it explores literally your five senses. It's the cutest show I have ever seen. Although cute feels a little bit, not the right word because it's absolutely moving. It's all about a puppet that looks like Elmo, so already super lovable. But he's blue instead of red. And we call him Piper, and he travels to all five boroughs. We have visuals of films of him literally traveling to these different locations in the boroughs. And then we have two song... Well one song writing teaching artist and then an acting teaching artist or a theater teaching artist. And they perform a musical for students.

Philip D.: Oh fun.

Alex Delare: And it's so much fun. They take breaks throughout to give sensory objects. So for example, when they go to Coney Island, they get sprays of seawater on their hands and they get to touch a beach towel and they get to touch sensory sand. So even though they're watching this all happen and seeing Piper explore these different places, they then get to be there with Piper. And that's just an amazing

project that we get to take to all five boroughs every year. So that's very, very fun. We're building our sensory protections that we do. So we try to do sensory shows for every production that we're offering. And then we also do all of our residency programs, which are theater and music residencies. We bring in to different schools at all five boroughs are specifically for students with special needs that we have actually created for them, as well as then we do a regular programming for more neuro-typical students. But every time we create any program, we're always thinking about universal design techniques and how we can make every program really resonate for those particular students.

Philip D.: That's amazing. A universal design is amazing and also tough, for lack of a better term. I was trying to think of a bigger word, but tough is what I came up with. Because when you are thinking of being all inclusive, it's sometimes one of the challenges that I've seen is that being inclusive in one way is not inclusive in another way, and they fight against each other in certain ways. When you're looking at universal design with your programming, what are some of the things you encounter? Or what are some of the steps you take?

Alex Delare: Well I was really lucky this past spring, I got to teach a residency myself, which I think I'm a super believer in an education department. If you are, you know, telling others to do the work you need to experience the work yourself. [crosstalk 00:18:47] And I'm so glad that Sarah is such a proponent of that. Every time I was seeing a residency, I felt like it was really hard to give any of our teaching artists any kind of view on what I would do if I had never done it. So getting to actually do a residency myself was so helpful. It was also working with students in a way that I had never before, so it was really very exciting. I had worked with students one on one with students that were nonverbal. And I had never worked in an entire group setting, specifically through the lens of using music and theater.

Alex Delare: So that was an incredibly new experience, and I found that the students just loved all the music we brought in. We learned over time that many of the students had were hard of hearing, and so they were picking up the vibration in the room from the music we were singing and performing, and we brought in sensory objects with them. But a lot of the work is really talking to the administrators of the school, meeting the teachers beforehand, going into the classrooms beforehand, seeing the students and getting really a sense of who they are, kind of work that they're doing. Having conversations with the students and the teachers and the paraprofessionals in the room and getting a sense of how can we then support them.

Philip D.: Wow, that's fantastic. Well I appreciate the collaboration that's happening there, because I think that's so important. If you're just making decisions for the sake of making decisions, and then you have a much lower rate of success per se, or a lower rate of impact. I think that happens far too often that people in a room just decide, well we're going to just do it this way because it seems like the best way. Rather than actually basing it on the community that you're

serving or the class that you're serving. Which, so great that you guys are able to always individualize it, which is an experience that not a lot of folks get. Even programs that are meant for certain demographics can't necessarily be catered to students in that way, and something's lost. You know? I think that's fair to say. And so I think that's absolutely wonderful. And kudos to both you and Sarah for having those philosophies. I think that's incredibly important. So obviously you have this role. Was Sarah also your entryway into working with MAC?

Alex Delare: Absolutely. I mean both Emmanuel, and Ellysheva were both members of MAC. Ellysheva is still currently a member, she's actually the administrative secretary of MAC, which is awesome. And so they both definitely encouraged me to participate in it. And I was really kind of waiting until I felt like I had earned more on my resume, as well as just, I was also finishing up my master's program at the time. I have a master's in history.

Philip D.: NBD, no big deal. Just like getting your masters, helping out with MAC, holding down a full-time job.

Alex Delare: You know, as you do. I mean all of us new Yorkers, we do it all.

Philip D.: This is true.

Alex Delare: Yeah, because I give walking tours as well. My husband and I have a company called The History Couple, so we give walking tours throughout New York. And we try as much as we can, again, to think about access and inclusivity as much as we can in our tours as well. But absolutely between running a business and going to school, a little hard to make it all happen.

Alex Delare: But I absolutely love MAC, and all the members of MAC have been so welcoming. I only started in April, and I joined MAC, so it's still quite a new experience. And I'm so excited because I'm now their archive secretary. So that's super exciting to help figure out what they really want MAC to be. And really, what does it mean to have archives for MAC? What does that look like to support the organization as it continues to grow for the future? And we're just so lucky to have so many incredible members of our community directly, as well as through subcommittees like supporting transitions. So we're going out and we're being able to support individuals, particularly individuals with developmental disabilities as well as individuals with autism not only get an internship in a place, but that also ultimately the big goal is obviously to get them actually a job. So getting to see really, how can we do that and how can we show all cultural organizations that that's something that maybe their space is accessible, but what about the people that are working? How can we feel that they're a part of that world as well?

Philip D.: Absolutely. And if you want to learn more about supporting transitions, listen to the very first episode of this podcast with Aliza Greenberg and Alison Mahoney [crosstalk 00:23:04]. They are absolutely amazing. And then listen to the

evolution of us recording, because that one, all you hear is elevator dings and feedback. So maybe just read the transcript.

Philip D.: That's fantastic. And like you said, I love MAC, and have for years and years and years from the moment I was first introduced to it. Maddie Ettenheim? No, that's not her name. I forget her name. Years and years ago, I don't know if she's still involved with MAC, but we were invited to the Jewish Heritage Museum to do a presentation while I was at TDF. And I didn't know anything about this. I was still new to New York City and the access field. And then meeting Miranda Hoeffner and then just-

Alex Delare: Oh she's amazing.

Philip D.: Yeah, she's a hero. And eventually, Miranda, you will come on this podcast. You cannot dodge my emails forever.

Alex Delare: You should Miranda, it's awesome.

Philip D.: But I love MAC and I love everything, and I love the website that you guys have now with tremendous resources and a robust calendar.

Alex Delare: Oh, I'm so glad that's getting the reach out. Good.

Philip D.: I love it just so much, and I refer to it often in my work. One of the things I love to do, because it doesn't happen too often, especially in the nonprofit world, is allow people to dream their dreams. Because we constantly hear no, or maybe not right now, or look at the budget. And I'm going to put it to you twofold. What do you hope for access and inclusion at New York City Children's Theater? And what do you hope for in a more general philosophical sense around cultural institutions?

Alex Delare: Absolutely. I mean, I think one thing that I really love about New York City Children's Theater, in case for any listeners who aren't very familiar, we already really, most of our audience, particularly in our education department, are really going into schools that are low income communities. So for the most part we're really reaching students that we have literally been told by the schools, and part of the reason we're getting funding, is because these schools have little to no arts programming at all. Particularly when it comes to theater and music. So getting to work on organization that is already doing that type of work and often literally is having students never have been had any experience in music and dance and theater before is just such an amazing experience to be a part of. And more and more we are slowly getting more and more District 75 schools.

Alex Delare: So in case listeners are not familiar with that, they're essentially schools that are designated as schools specifically helping students with disabilities and supporting them. So we are now just at a handful. And we were lucky this year to actually start working with Amanda McPhee, who's part of the District 75

community, and really heads up so much of that and doing the arts administration portion. And she was able to give us two schools to start working with. And with great success. And now we're going into four more this year. But we are so hopeful that these just keep growing for us. Because Sarah and I as such huge advocacy advocates, we really hope that our work can keep transitioning in that way. We'd work in lots of integrated classrooms or ICT spaces already, but we are so excited about keep expanding that reach to District 75. And in many ways if that became what New York City Children's Theater did, I think we would be more than excited to have that be the case.

Alex Delare: I think, again, we love the work that we're doing, but that reach, we really feel like we can be doing more. And with Sarah and my background in access, we really feel like we can really keep steering that boat forward, so to speak. So I really hope that continues for the organization and for our teaching artists to keep getting this exposure, because they often tell us this is the kind of work that we most are excited about. And they want to be in these communities. And we want so much to be able to keep getting them into those communities because we learn so much together.

Philip D.: Absolutely. Absolutely.

Alex Delare: My own dreams though for access, oh man, there's just so much. I mean, I'm very excited that New York City Children's Theater for sure exists. I'm so excited that organizations like this are happening. And Sarah also works for an amazing organization, which you mentioned, ActionPlay. You know, hearing about the work that co-lab is doing. Like there are so many organizations that are doing wonderful work. I want to keep seeing more of these organizations grow. And keep thinking about, how can we be as accessible as possible? But also start seeing more and more hiring practices that allow individuals with disabilities to really see themselves in this space and not just because it's accessible, but because they themselves are taking on larger roles in the organization. So I hope more and more for more diversity in hiring, and that becoming something that becomes more standardized than what it is now.

Philip D.: Absolutely. Let the D in diversity stand for disability. Yeah, I support that 1000%. Well thank you so much Alex, for taking the time to chat.

Alex Delare: Thank you, Phil.

Philip D.: Thank you for all the work you're doing. It's wonderful and needed. And thank you for being an Access Champion.

Alex Delare: Oh, thank you so much. You too.

Philip D.: Thanks Alex for taking the time to chat, and thank you for coordinating all of those other interviews. It was a blast to get to sit down and talk to a handful or so of really wonderful folks. And I love those kind of sit down popup studios.

You know, we did that and obviously we've done it a few years now, or a couple years now with the Kennedy Center. We went down to Art Reach. Just setting up camp with MAC for a few hours and chatting with some folks also, it's just like, that kind of thing is great. It's exhausting. By the end my voice is always shot because I am learning to take care of my voice in interviews, and use my diaphragm and things. Things that I had no idea about. But my wife is really good about telling me these things, and sending me on the way with tea. Thank you so much Alex, and thank you to all of the members of MAC who sat down with us. And I look forward to chatting with even more of your members.

Philip D.:

It's a huge organization, huge consortium. So many organizations represented in it, and I can't wait to chat with all of them. Thank you as always to our producer Matt Kerstetter for making a 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 our champion intern Savannah Cooper for all of the social media content that she puts out on the weekly. Thank you to Tommy Karr for our amazing logos. Thank you to Eric Walton and Austin Begley for all of the music on the podcast. We'll be back again next week and remember inclusion believers, never stop running through that brick wall.