

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 this week. We've run away and join the circus. We have Lisa Lewis who's the director of community programs over at the Big Apple Circus joining us, and Lisa and I have known each other for a long time and she is a ball of passion and energy. The first time I actually met her when she came into the offices at TDF when I was working there, she had broken her leg, but you've never met anybody with a broken leg with that much joy and excitement entering a given room. So you know, I obviously enjoyed working with her then, in that capacity, and I've loved following the work that she's done since at Big Apple Circus and making it an incredibly inclusive experience for everyone.

Philip D.:

Excited to share that interview with you guys. It is our first interview from our new space. Really a good find for us. We'll be able to do more in person stuff. It's an accessible building, elevator's out to wazoo, and we're working out the kinks a little bit with the setup, describing in the interview. Just not completely unpacked yet, but the goal is to be able to utilize the space, and be able to provide this podcast in a couple different formats. Video being one, as much as we can with our current staffing. Get that done. We will, but it's an exciting move for us, and I think it's going just help continue the growth of this organization.

Philip D.:

Speaking of growth, one way that we do grow is through Patreon, so take it away Alex.

Alex Delare:

Hi there, I'm Alex Delair and I was on Phil Dallman's Access Champions episode 80. I loved meeting Phil and sharing our stories about accessibility, inclusivity, and MAC or the Museum Arts and Culture Access Consortium together.

Alex Delare:

Did you realize that there's even more amazing Access Champion stories out there? I know, it's true for just \$1 a month you can get access to exclusive interviews, games, consume even a book club. Oh, that sounds like fun. In order to get all this access, please go to www.patreon.com/accesschampions and sign up. You can get all sorts of fabulous perks like awesome swag, on air shout outs, and stickers. Who doesn't like stickers. Thank you for considering joining the team of inclusion warriors for only \$1 a month at www.patreon.com/accesschampions. We so appreciate your support.

Philip D.:

Thanks Alex. And if you aren't necessarily able to support us for \$1 a month on Patreon, another great way for you to support the show and our mission of accessibility, diversity and inclusion is to rate and review us. Give us a five star review. Don't give us that four star review. If you're going to give us a four star review, hit me up. Let me know how I can get that five star review from you, because that's all I want. We want to make all of your dreams come true as it relates to accessibility, diversity, and inclusion, and we're really striving to be the best podcast possible. So wherever you listen to the show, if you could take 30 seconds and hit us with those five stars in a nice little review, that'll help us reach more folks. It does affect the algorithms of how we're advertised out in the universe, and we appreciate every rating and every review that we receive. And that's that.

Philip D.:

Also you can follow us on social media, we're @accesschampion on Instagram and Twitter, and the Access Champion Podcast on Facebook. So if you don't already, there's some great content. We have new images coming from our new champion artist, Justin Campbell, that are fantastic and we're so excited to share them with you. But I'll keep it short and sweet this week. Let's keep this ball rolling or keep it juggling.

Philip D.:

So without further ado, Access Champion, Lisa Lewis.

Philip D.:

All right. And we are here in the first ever recording in our new office studio, on our first time on our couch. It took me a good 30 minutes to get these mic stands set up, I think we're buying new mic stands for this set up. And we are here with Lisa Lewis, who is the director of community programs for Big Apple Circus. Thanks for coming in, and into our space. To be clear, our space is now currently filled with trash bags, broken down cargo boxes. It is not set up in any way other than this couch and these microphones barely. So thank you for coming by.

Lisa L.:

Well, thank you so much for having me.

Philip D.:

We've known each other for a long time. Back early when I first started at TDF, I think Big Apple Circus was one of the first partnerships we had, but I'd love to hear a little bit about your journey into the world of accessibility and inclusion.

Lisa L.:

It's an interesting to me, but not all that complicated journey. It's kind of like you just follow your heart and if this is where your heart guides you, then here you are.

Philip D.:

Okay. Yeah. That's fair.

Lisa L.:

So I started off performing for Ringling when I was a clown, and I looked out at the audience and one of my fellow clowns was signing to a group of kids, and I watched the looks on their faces, and I saw the absolute delight on their faces. So I decided to learn sign language. So I did.

Lisa L.:

So fast forward, I started working with Big Apple Circus. I started working in the hospital program, and they had Circus of the Senses already existed at that point.

Philip D.:

Okay.

Lisa L.:

So I started volunteering for it, then I became the interpreter for it. Then later I started running it, then the circus changed ownership and structure and management, and now I'm in charge of it.

Philip D.:

Hey, that's an all right-

Lisa L.:

And a lot of other things too.

Philip D.:

That's an all right journey. Well, I know when we first met Circus of the Senses had been going for a while. For those who don't know, can you give us a breakdown of Circus of the Senses?

Lisa L.:

So Circus of the Senses was one of the very first inclusion programs of the Big Apple Circus, and it started in 1987 with the founders Paul Binder trying to find new audiences, because it's the Circus of the City, and they were trying to find new audiences to reach so they started Circus of the Senses.

Philip D.:

I'm going to stop you real quick, because I think it's important, and I'm sure I will have touched on this in the intro, but I think one of the important things to know is that Big Apple Circus is a nonprofit, correct?

Lisa L.:

Big Apple Circus was a nonprofit.

Philip D.:

Oh okay. Great.

Lisa L.:

We're now a different paradigm. The nonprofit version of us went bankrupt.

Philip D.:

Okay.

Lisa L.:

We are now business structure wise, a for profit organization. That being said, I'm going to add a qualifier.

Philip D.:

Okay.

Lisa L.:

Because we're still doing all of the same programs that we did that were with the tent, not the programs that had nothing to do with the tent, but the programs, all the inclusion programs in the tent are not only maintained, they're growing exponentially.

Philip D.:

Oh, fantastic. Oh, we'll definitely touch on that then, but yeah, feel free to dive back into Circus of the Senses.

Lisa L.:

No problem. So it started in 1987, it began strictly for the blind, and for some reason it sticks in my head, Marty Glican, was the first sportscaster to do the live audio description of the Big Apple Circus, and probably no one has any idea who that is, but that's okay. He was a sportscaster in New York back in the 80s.

Philip D.:

All right.

Lisa L.:

Why I remember that, I don't know, but I do. Anyway, fast forward there, the audio description for the blind, then we added American Sign Language interpreters for the deaf. The program went on to include different abilities of all ways, shapes, and forms, and kinds. And when I came on board, when we were a not-for-profit, the tickets were free. Obviously as a for profit, we have to sell them, although that said they're only 10 bucks. So, when I came on board, the demographic was shifting and we had so much, so many requests for a sensory friendly production. We had all of our same audiences who were blind, who are deaf, who were deaf and blind, who were the laundry list of things that required accommodations in order to be able to fully appreciate a circus.

Lisa L.:

But the list of autism and sensory requests was just growing exponentially. So we said, "Listen, let's make a show, just sensory friendly show." And that's when I got to meet you, because we partnered with TDF, and I learned many, many, many things.

Philip D.:

Yeah, it's a great, one of the things and actually it's one of the reasons I started the podcast after I left TDF, was the national programs. And when I left TDF and I was consulting, the thing that I miss the most was the conversations and the interactions with different companies and different folks doing amazing work around the world. This is a plug, I guess, if you are looking for sort of guidance either, I believe they have two programs now, which is the open captioning training program, and they call it the autism friendly training program as well, where it's just guidance and help kind of a little bit of a safety net when you're launching this, and that was, I think the most exciting thing was that previously when we were there it was, I don't want to call anything standard theater, but it was pretty standard theater that we were dealing with. And then Big Apple Circus calls up.

Lisa L.:

Hey guys, help.

Philip D.:

And you go, the circus? And they're like, "How do you make the circus sensory friendly?" And you did it.

Lisa L.:

We did. We absolutely did.

Philip D.:

What are some of the sort of supports and adjustments that you guys made?

Lisa L.:

Primarily audio visual. Obviously no strobe lights, but I try to avoid those anyway, because seizures are really annoying.

Philip D.:

Listen, I am a big proponent of let's just lose strobes as a society.

Lisa L.:

Yeah, we just don't need it.

Philip D.:

We can just let them go.

Lisa L.:

It's not essential.

Philip D.:

Just let them go.

Lisa L.:

Not essential. So I try to avoid those anyway. If there happened to be any in the show that particular year, obviously they're cut. We leave the house lights on. Any stark contrasts I try to mitigate. The volume, I run around with my little decibel meter and our sound engineer has one on her board as well. So we walk around comparing notes to make sure that we don't top out 85 decibels, and that includes audience clapping. So sometimes you can't control the audience applause.

Philip D.:

Right, yeah, that's a [inaudible 00:12:42].

Lisa L.:

And you want audiences to applaud, and sometimes the volume does go over 85 if they really like what they've seen, and nothing we can do about that.

Philip D.:

Right.

Lisa L.:

But you want an audience to clap and it's also not a high contrast moment, because whoever's in there is involved. There's no blinking lights in the audience. One of the things in our earlier years that I noticed was that kids were having a hard time going from the brightly lit concession area into the darkness of the tent. So I hold back the curtain so that there's no more contrast there. So you don't go from bright to dark. The house lights stay on. We have a calming area in the lobby. We have extra signage. Everything you taught me how to do, we have plenty of volunteers. We give out the little manipulatives, but we can't give out the same ones as TDF.

Philip D.:

Right.

Lisa L.:

Because we have animals and performers in a throwing distance of our first row. And if you throw something that could freak a horse out, it could be a problem.

Philip D.:

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Little bit little bit.

Lisa L.:

So we have these big, red noses. Big, red, sponge noses. [crosstalk 00:13:59] How appropriate.

Philip D.:

I'm a big advocate for... In any type of accessibility or inclusion, find your moment to brand.

Lisa L.:

Exactly.

Philip D.:

Like there's no reason not to.

Lisa L.:

Exactly.

Philip D.:

Listen, I'm a huge proponent of that. And honestly, it's a good selling point when you're like looking for organizational buy-in. It's like, yeah. So not only are we doing this thing, but we're going to put our logo on everything.

Lisa L.:

And we have. Last year we had a sponsor who helped us with the filling up of the calming area.

Philip D.:

Okay.

Lisa L.:

We work with Fun and Function, and they gave us all sorts of wonderful stuff. This year we have an amazing sponsor, a local company called [Punk and Phut 00:14:43].

Philip D.:

I know them well.

Lisa L.:

You know them?

Philip D.:

Yeah.

Lisa L.:

Oh yay, we get to work with them this year. I'm so excited.

Philip D.:

They're a wonderful company. A good friend of mine, Liz [Bigadis 00:14:54], Shout out, Liz Bigadis. Has done a lot of work with them and yeah, big fan. That's fantastic.

Lisa L.:

Well, we're partnering with them this year on all of our inclusion stuff and we're really excited.

Philip D.:

That's amazing, and that's an excellent segue. What is the sort of overarching look at the current state of inclusion work happening at Big Apple Circus?

Lisa L.:

It has become a driving through line. I don't know anybody out there who was fortunate enough to see this past year's show, but one of our primary acts, our hand balancing act included one of the two partners who's a wheelchair user.

Philip D.:

Great.

Lisa L.:

Some long name, don't know why, don't care. Didn't affect the act, it was phenomenal.

Lisa L.:

Our front of house staff on a daily basis, we go through NYC at Work for a lot of our hiring for a front of house hiring. So we have one of our ticket takers was deaf. We have people on the autism spectrum. We really try to be inclusive in all areas of the company. So that's a new thing that we are able to do. In terms of productions, we'll have two Circus of the Senses productions, which will be the first week of December. We'll have two school day matinees of autism friendly productions, one in November, one later in January. We'll also have a family show for autism, which will be on a Sunday. The dates aren't quite set yet, we haven't finished our calendar, but it'll be on a Sunday at noon, so that families can come all together, not have to get out of school.

Lisa L.:

In addition to that, between our two Circus of the Senses productions, which are on a Thursday and a Friday, because we already have all the AD set up. We have Dinner in the Dark. Dinner and a show in the dark, which for that we partner with Abigail's Kitchen in the village, and Abby brings up a full three course catered meal and all of the sighted people are invited and asked to wear blindfolds so that they can appreciate the entire world, the way their cousins, brothers, daughters, friends, people that they randomly know or don't even know can appreciate, because there's so much more and they get the full audio description for the show as well.

Philip D.:

That's fantastic, and truly inclusive then where everybody is kind of experiencing the event in the same way.

Lisa L.:

And you don't have to know somebody to be blind, if you just like want a really cool evening, join us.

Philip D.:

What a what an interesting sensory experience, I have to imagine. Oh that's absolutely wonderful. I'm so excited. I mean, I'm always so, I'll say I'm always so excited to talk to you, but also I love everything that happens there because who doesn't, and I don't want to say who doesn't like the circus, lots of people don't love the circus. Some people have a thing about clowns. I love the circus. Always have, always will. It came to Philly every now and then, but there was like a smaller one that would come through a little bit closer, that was always a blast down in South Jersey that we would go to. I always just had so much fun.

Philip D.:

I'm excited to ask you this question, because I know you're a dreamer, and I'm often sitting with folks who I don't know, so I'm like, "Oh, you dream your dreams", and I'm like, "Here's hoping you got some dreams."

Lisa L.:

You know I do.

Philip D.:

And usually they do. But I know you do. So I'll put it to you. I'd love to hear what are your dreams for the future of Big Apple Circus' inclusion programs and inclusive nature in general, which it sounds like has already taken a step forward with representation within the performers.

Lisa L.:

My dream is really, it's a big dream. My heart loves circus so much, because to me it is the representation of the most a human body and soul can accomplish. Circus performers are, in general, the most highly organized, driven, skilled, talented, down to earth people. Our flying act this year, for a quick example, did this brilliant flying act. Two days later they're wearing hard hats for load out. There's no space for divas.

Lisa L.:

What I would love in my dream is to share that joy without any barriers at all. I would love for our company to be completely inclusive. That said, you got to be good.

Philip D.:

Yeah, oh yeah.

Lisa L.:

You don't get to come in just because you do something. Well, you actually have to be good. Aside from that, but I'd love to see our company continue with its inclusion efforts. I'd love to see, we always have braille programs out. I'd love to see more people take advantage of them. We have a deaf, and I forgot to say deaf night, we have deaf night once or twice a year where we just have a random interpreter because lots of people want to come. So that's great, come. I just would like to see it do even more and become a real staple of the Big Apple Circus, because I feel like everybody's heart is in that direction.

Philip D.:

I would say it's definitely clear that inclusion is in the company's DNA.

Lisa L.:

Feels that way.

Philip D.:

And I think you are very clearly also facilitating sort of the front facing aspects of that and how that grows. So I think I would say you guys are absolutely on the right track, clearly.

Lisa L.:

Thank you.

Philip D.:

And I can definitely see all of those things happening.

Lisa L.:

Fingers crossed.

Philip D.:

Well thank you so much, Lisa. Thank you so much for all the work that you do, and have done, and continue to do. Thank you to the Big Apple Circus for all of the work that they do as a whole, and thank you for being an access champion.

Philip D.:

Thanks again to Lisa for taking the time to come by and chat. I apologize once again for the state of the office as it was during the interview, but by the time this episode airs, it will be all set up, it'll be super clean, and we'll be good to go for all future guests. So a reminder that you can support us on Patreon for as little as \$1 a month, and to be clear that that dollar goes towards subsidizing the accessibility efforts of the podcast, whether that is our transcripts or our forthcoming ASL videos, and other dreams of dreams that I have of making this an incredibly inclusive experience. So patreon.com/accesschampions, \$1 a month, you get exclusive content and a sticker. For a little bit more, there's mugs, there's tee shirts, all of the above. So check it out. And yeah, that's that.

Philip D.:

So thank you as always to our executive producer Matt Kerstetter for making us sound great each and every single week. Thank you to the one and only Allie B. Gorrie, our associate producer for everything that she does. Thank you to our champion artists, Justin Campbell, for the images every week. Thank you to Tommy Karr for all of our logo artwork. Thank you to Eric Walton and Austin Begley for all of the music on the show.

Philip D.:

We'll be back again next week, and remember Inclusion Believers, never stop running through that brick wall.