

Philip D.:

Hello Inclusion Believers and welcome to the Access Champions Podcast. I'm your host, Philip Dallmann for this week's journey into the galaxies of Accessibility, Diversity and Inclusion. We got another great episode for you guys this week. This week we're joined by Wendy Elliott-Vandiver who is an artist, a cartoonist and activist out of Philadelphia. And just a really wonderful human, has done a lot of great work for a very long time and has circled back around with her art, utilizing it to really take on microaggressions, which is something we haven't touched on in a while. As I'm thinking about it, it's something that came up early on in the podcasts history. I think back when one of the things came up with Christina Trevino when we were chatting way back in the early episodes. So excited for that to come back to the forefront and if you're interested in the artwork and in these cartoons, the link to a Wendy's page is in the copy and we'll also have it posted across social media.

Philip D.:

So speaking of social media, if you don't already, go ahead and give us a follow @accesschampion on Instagram and Twitter and The Access Champion Podcast on Facebook. Jay Reed who has joined us from NYU is diving into our social media and taking that on and it's been really great and that's also where you'll catch the new episode images created by Justin Campbell, which are unbelievable and we're so grateful for that. But yeah, give us a follow, connect with us, share with us, tag us in things we love interacting with our listeners. We love learning more about what you're interested in and what you're learning, what you're hearing. As I often say on the show, we are a podcast for the people by the people. So we want to live by that by interacting with you guys across all platforms. And another way you can interact with us is via email. We are [accesschampion@gmail.com](mailto:accesschampion@gmail.com) hit us up, share with us any articles or thoughts you may have, any feedback. We're always open to that. And now a quick word about Patreon.

Sophia Cheyenne:

Hello Inclusion Believers. This is Sophia Cheyenne from episodes three and 77 and I wanted to take a moment to chat with you about Patreon. Patreon is a great way for you, the listener to be a part of the podcast by supporting it for as little as \$1 a month, guys, \$1 a month. Not only do you get access to exclusive content and swag, you also help facilitate the podcast being accessible and inclusive with transcripts, accessible recording spaces for interviews and the upcoming ASL videos. So not only are you rewarded for your commitment, you are actively making Accessibility and Inclusion information more and more accessible. And that is the heart of this show. Obviously, if you listen to Phil and all the co interviewers every week, you believe in Inclusion and you believe in Access and that's what being a Patreon and supporter does. So please consider committing just \$1 a month and you can go to [patreon.com/accesschampions](https://patreon.com/accesschampions) today and together we can run through this brick wall.

Philip D.:

Thanks Sophia. And if you aren't able to support us on Patreon, which again is only a dollar a month, I hope you'll consider supporting us in another way, which is by rating and reviewing us wherever you listen to the show. Go ahead and give us that five star review, a five star rating and then hopefully an emphatic five star review as well. If you feel compelled to not give us five stars, please don't rate us. Go ahead and use that aforementioned [accesschampion@gmail.com](mailto:accesschampion@gmail.com) hit us up, tell us what we can do to get that five star rating and emphatic review because that's what we want to do. We want to provide the best possible podcasts for all of you out there. So again, ways to support us, Patreon just a dollar a month or rating and reviewing us. We appreciate both dearly and that's that for this week. So without further ado, Access Champion, Wendy Elliott-Vandiver.

Philip D.:

All right, and we are here with Wendy Elliott-Vandiver an artist and cartoonist in Philadelphia. Thanks for taking the time to chat, Wendy.

Wendy E-V.:

Thank you. My pleasure.

Philip D.:

You came through that wonderful tagging session that Alana Raffle did when I put out there I said, who's doing amazing things? And then all these Philly folks just started tagging away and it was wonderful. As a South Jersey boy, I always love to see good work happening in and around Philadelphia. So, you're my favorite kind of guests because I don't know you and so I get to come on this journey with you and with our listeners. So I'd love to hear a little bit about your journey through life becoming an artist.

Wendy E-V.:

Okay. Well, I've been an artist my whole life since I was a small child, I used to love to make drawings and paintings and sculpture. It was something that I need to do, just it felt like I needed to do it to survive, just like breathing. And it was something that I was good at, I was really comfortable doing and I went to college for fine art. I went to Tyler School of Art, part of Temple University where I majored in sculpture, but I also dabbled in painting and photography and in other areas. And I've also been an advocate in the disability rights community for many years since the early 1980s, I fought for accessible transportation in Philadelphia. We forced SEPTA or level of transportation authority to put lifts on buses. And I was also a leader of Disabled in Action of Pennsylvania and I served as chair of the Philadelphia Mayor's Commission on People with Disabilities for seven years.

Wendy E-V.:

And I've also served on boards of a lot of other disability organizations like the American Association of People with Disabilities and Liberty Resources. And United Spinal is an organization that I'm involved with right now. And right now I've been putting my art and my activism together with the creation of my cartoons. And my cartoons are designed to create awareness in the community as well as disability pride.

Philip D.:

And where did this, I'm just circling back a little bit, where did your passion for disability activism come from?

Wendy E-V.:

It was kind of interesting, when I was growing up, I've been disabled since birth, have had a spinal bifida and I never knew any other disabled kids when I was growing up. I had no role models, I was always the only disabled kid in the class and I think I coined the term mainstream before it was even in existence. But my parents really supported me in that desire to go to the regular school where the kids on my block were going. But it wasn't until I was in college that I got involved in the disability rights community when I became president of DIA and got involved in the advocacy. So that led me into my first professional job, which was at the office for civil rights in the US department of education. I worked there for nine years.

Philip D.:

Oh wow. What were some of the things going on in the world of disability while you were working there?

Wendy E-V.:

Well, trying to make school districts accessible, meant if we worked with a lot of schools and colleges, anyone that received federal funds from the department of education and after that I worked in corporate America for many years as the human resources manager. And I've been circling back to my roots in the last several years doing my art and getting back to my activism. So I feel really excited about that.

Philip D.:

I appreciate when government agencies require places to become accessible or have inclusive programming in order to receive funding. I know a few years back the NEA changed their requirements as well to really push some folks who had been dragging their feet. But definitely rely on NEA funding. So often we've had discussions, I've ever been a part of discussions and it's why are certain things taking so long here when over in England they're not. Specifically in the world of the arts and the differences, the government requirements. It's not super optional, whereas here it's felt like a choice for a long time. Well, that's great I mean, I love that journey, I also love Temple University, big fan, my very best friend's a teacher there. But while you were there, it may be jarring for some people to hear that I mean, there are many folks who get involved in different types of social justice worker activism while they're in college. But it seems like you were really set up. What was that time like for you while you were at Temple?

Wendy E-V.:

Well, while I was at Temple, my disability started to increase more, I'd always walked with leg braces and then after college I started using a cane and eventually then when I graduated college I was using crutches and then a wheelchair. So it progressed and it became harder and harder for me to get around. But at college, this was very early with the section 504 of the rehabilitation act, which was a law that came before the Americans with disabilities act that required anyone that had recipients of funds from, in my case, the department of education to make their facilities accessible. And at Tyler, at Temple, it was in the earlier days and it was very difficult for me to get around. There weren't elevators and all the buildings I used to have to crawl up the steps with my portfolio or doing crawling around doing my sculptures on the floor. And it was a challenge getting to use an elevator and having to wait for a maintenance person to let me in.

Wendy E-V.:

So there were a lot of difficulties and I even made a piece, an art piece about it where I staged a funeral of, "Funeral of a poster child." And I had people in my class all gathered around and we literally buried a photo of a poster child in a little casket. And that was my story about trying to bury some of the myths and stereotypes about disability and to make sure that we're seen as full human beings that do everything that everyone else does and we have a right to do everything that everyone else does. So that was the beginning of my advocacy at that point in college.

Philip D.:

And so as you live to, you had an extended journey, a bunch of stops across the way there in the world of advocacy. What brought you, what prompted you to come back in the intersection of your advocacy and your art?

Wendy E-V.:

Well, I felt that I really had something to say for many years I was always making art but trying to add my politics to it and my advocacy, I felt that I really had something to say to the world. And it was very powerful experience for me to create the cartoons, it was very cathartic because all the cartoons are telling real life stories. So about my life with disability, things that people say to me when I'm just going about my day and living my normal, "Uninspirational life." And I started just telling these stories and it felt good to let them out on paper. A lot of people with disabilities could really identify with what I was saying and people without disabilities really enjoyed the cartoons, they explore some of the microaggressions that we experience. And a lot of people without disabilities were really surprised at some of the things that people would say to me and they felt bad about it. And some of them wondered did I say something like that inadvertently?

Wendy E-V.:

Because I think it really sheds a light on the issue, opens eyes for people who are never really be thinking about it.

Philip D.:

What are an example or two of some of these things that prompt, an interaction that prompts a cartoon essentially?

Wendy E-V.:

One of my first cartoons is called WTF or what the, and it's a humorous cartoon. When I was working in human resources every day I would drive my van to work and get out of the car and sometimes people would say things that were really very strange and inappropriate to me. And I could hardly think of the appropriate response at the time, I shied away from that, afraid that I would escalate a situation or create more problems. And I started writing the things down on a little app on my cell phone and after a while I would get an idea to create a cartoon. And one of my favorite cartoon is this, what the, cartoon where I have my service dog at the time, his name was Chipper and I created the dog with a three headed dog who's responding to a lot of the inappropriate remarks. Like people would say, it's good to see you out today, like they let me out for the day or I'll pray for you Jesus loves you. And then the dog's responding, aren't we Jewish mom?

Philip D.:

Oh my goodness.

Wendy E-V.:

Or saying, I don't think of you as disabled. And then the dog is saying, I don't think of you as enlightened. So the dog is like an insult dog, my alter ego responding in the cartoon. So I have a lot of fun with that and using the dog to communicate and using a bright color, very sweet color. But if the subject matter is very dark I add the humor to it, that draws people in and makes it more accessible so people can live and see what I have to say.

Philip D.:

I was just about to say, it makes the experience a little bit more accessible and as an entryway and then you can assess your own interactions with folks with disabilities and you're like, am I, I may not be as forward as that. It's so, I laugh, but I cry a little bit when I hear you say that someone's said they'll pray for you. I had an interaction a few years back at an unnamed theater here in New York where we were doing a sensory friendly performance and an usher came up to an attendee and kissed her hand and then put it on her forehead and said, I'm going to pray for you. And then I just went, in what world is that okay? Period. But I was like, did this person just forget that we are in New York? I was like, regardless of disability, we don't want to be touched.

Wendy E-V.:

Right. We need them to respect our space. And I had somebody once when I was at one of my favorite Italian restaurants in Philly. And I'm sitting there with my husband and my son and my daughter in law and my service dog is under the table with me. And the waiter, owner/waiter of the restaurant comes up to me and says, do you ever pray for something better? And I looked at him because I don't know what he's, what are you talking about? And he said, not to have to use a wheelchair. And my mouth just dropped. I couldn't think of anything to say at the time, but I turned that into a cartoon also where I'm saying, I have everything I need. That was my response. I have everything I need literally, I have my family surrounding me and I have everything I need. But the dog is responding I'll have some chicken, Marcella and aside with penny.

Philip D.:

Listen, I think that all the time at home, my wife and I will be, something will be happening and we're like we have what we need here, we're a family and I think but our pup Luna, she probably wants some salmon treats. Like, that's so funny. I appreciate the fact that you're able to take these interactions, which are innately, I don't know that there's necessarily malice behind them but probably more ignorance than anything else, but you're able to take them and create something that facilitates discussion. It's accessible, it's relatable I think probably to many in the disability community, I actually, as I was re scrolling through a few today, I was like, I have to send my friend Christina and podcast board member Christina is also a wheelchair user. And I just thought, man, she's going to relate to so many of these, we have been together in so many of these situations and with so many different microaggressions, which is actually a thing we've talked about on the show before.

Philip D.:

It's relatable to that community and then I think again, it does hold up a mirror for at least a moment of self reflection for those who may not be part of the disability community but don't want to make, their goal is not out there to make someone feel some kind of way with their words. So that moment of reflection can facilitate learning which I think is so important.

Wendy E-V.:

Yeah, it's powerful.

Philip D.:

And I know that it's not always, if you don't grow up around a certain community, you may not know how to interact with them because you don't have the experience. And then everyone's so scared of putting their foot in the mouth and when, rather than doing something like what you just described,

obviously that is, I would say, well beyond the line, but removing that fear and by your comedic take on these situations. I think it allows, at least for me, if I was reading these and I did not necessarily have the first person experience I do with some of my friends in similar situations, it would open me to ask a question like, does this really happen? Did somebody actually say this to you? And if so am I making sure like I'm not doing any of these things? Because again, like I said, I think, I like to believe people are innately good. Whether that's naive or not, I don't know. But I think that's stuff, things like your cartoons help facilitate those conversations.

Philip D.:

And then again, what we all strive for is the common humanity, right? As you say you're fighting for the fact that everyone has the right to do the same things and have access to the same things.

Wendy E-V.:

Yeah. We're not asking for anything special or different, we just want to be included and be like everyone else and have access to an education, housing and so forth. Things that everyone else takes for granted.

Philip D.:

Education and housing, no big deal, just those two things. So one of the things I love to do on the show is because so many advocates and nonprofit workers and all those things aren't necessarily asked to dream their dreams. I on the podcast we have no budget for dreams, you can dream as big as you'd like. I'd love to hear from you what your hopes are for your activism focused going forward and what you hope for Accessibility and Inclusion as a whole going forward.

Wendy E-V.:

Well, for me, I want to continue to help convey the message to the world, is that disabled people are strong and powerful and beautiful people and that we need to respect and recognize and celebrate and value us. Value people with disabilities for who they are and what they bring to the table and it's part of our identity, disability. It's not something that we need to overcome or to cure or pity and it's not a vehicle for other people's inspiration. So those are things that I really want to convey through the cartoons and in other types of art. And that we're proud of our disabilities and we want to be fully included in all aspects of society, whether it's the workplace housing, transportation and so forth, recreation activities. And that it's just a seat at the table that we want to have a voice and access to what everybody else has.

Wendy E-V.:

And I hope in the future now we're coming up on our 30th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act or ADA and thinking about all the progress we've made, but still a lot more work to do until we see full inclusion and opportunity for people with disabilities. So that's really my hope for the future, the next phase in the disability justice.

Philip D.:

Well, I love and support both sets of ideas there. I think your art is making an impact. I hope all of our listeners will be checking it out along with this episode. You can click the link in the copy and I look forward to continuing to follow your work and follow your passion. And I thank you for everything that you've done and continued to do as an advocate and as an artist with advocacy. And like I said, I look

forward to seeing what you do going forward. So thank you for all of that and thank you for being an access champion.

Wendy E-V.:

Thank you so much for having me today.

Philip D.:

Thanks Wendy for taking the time to chat, it was great. And as I said in the interview, I'm always excited about all the work that's happening in Philadelphia, having grown up in the area. It's just really wonderful and the area is lucky to have someone like you doing so much great work for such a long time. And again, to our listeners, if you're interested in seeing the cartoons that are really amazing regarding microaggressions, go ahead and click the link in the copy or we'll have it linked across social media as well. A reminder again, if you would consider, please consider supporting us on Patreon. It's [patreon.com/accesschampion](https://patreon.com/accesschampion). It's just a dollar a month, you get access to exclusive content. We have a couple of interviews we're about to roll out exclusively on Patreon, which we're really excited about and you get a sticker for just that dollar level. Other levels above you get different swag, shout outs and all sorts of perks. So worth it.

Philip D.:

And again, if he can't swing the \$1 a month, please consider rating and reviewing us, five star reviews please only. If you're going to give us less than those five stars, go ahead and hit us up at [accesschampion@gmail.com](mailto:accesschampion@gmail.com) and tell us how we can get those five stars. As always, thank you to our executive producer Matt Kerstetter for making us sound great each and every week. Thank you to our associate producer, the one and only Alie B. Gorrie, thank you to our champion artist, Justin Campbell for the images every week. Thank you to Jay Reed for all that he's providing us across social media. Thank you to Tommy Karr for that wonderful logo and thank you to Austin Begley and Eric Walton for all the music you hear across the podcast. We'll be back again next week and remember, Inclusion believers, never stop running through that brick wall.