

Alie B. Gorrie:

Hello, Inclusion Believers. Welcome to the Access Champions Podcast. I'm your Associate Producer, Alie B. Gorrie, and I'm here to facilitate this week's journey into The Galaxies of Access, Diversity and Inclusion.

Alie B. Gorrie:

Today, we'd dive back into our throwback series, ACP rewind. In this series, we'll catch up with a previous guest of the podcast to find out about their latest contributions to the worlds of access and inclusion. After a brief update, we'll highlight their work as we replay their original episode, because come on, everybody loves a good throwback.

Alie B. Gorrie:

Before we dive into our rewind, I want to chat about just how important it is for all of us to stay connected at this moment in our history. Please reach out and be sure to connect with us on social media. You can follow us at Access Champion on Instagram and Twitter and the Access Champions Podcast on Facebook. Feel free to reach out via email, accesschampion@gmail.com and drop us a line. We're always looking to expand and build our community and network.

Alie B. Gorrie:

Also, if you are looking for more Access Champion stories, content and exclusives, find us on Patreon. For just \$1 a month, you can have access to all kinds of bonus content, access champion swag, on air shout outs and so much more. You heard me, all it takes is \$1 a month. Thanks for considering joining our team of Inclusion Warriors. You can find us at www.patreon.com/accesschampions. We greatly appreciate your support.

Alie B. Gorrie:

Today, you're going to hear a little update from our third guest of the podcast, Sofiya Cheyenne. Now, we've had Sofiya back many times here on the Access Champions Podcast, and we are big fans of her work. Sofiya, let us know a little bit about what you've been up to. Take it away.

Sofiya Cheyenne:

Hi. This is Sofiya Cheyenne here with your Access Champion Rewind. I was in episode three of Access Champions Podcast, and there's a lot of updates to share actually, especially in this time of COVID pandemic and quarantine I have not left my house since March 13th 2020, which is 94 days. I have been home for 94 days. The reason why I have been being very extra careful of staying indoors is because I am pregnant. I am nine months pregnant, and I'm about to have my first baby on July 1st 2020. So it has been a very, very important time for me to stay healthy and take care of myself.

Sofiya Cheyenne:

In addition to bringing a new life into the world, which feels like a very important responsibility in this time of civil unrest and health crisis, I've also been working very diligently on my own personal projects and aspirations as an artist and as a, what I'm starting to use the term, "liberator." I have been in lots of work that includes inclusion and access in the workplace, in the nonprofit sector, in the arts and in education.

Sofiya Cheyenne:

I'm working on anti-bias workshops in a consulting capacity. I've been working with a consultant at PENN Creative Strategy for about a year now, and we are developing some really great workshops and work that just is bringing more awareness, inclusion and access to the nonprofit sector. I'm also knee-deep in trying to figure out this online learning thing, and as an educator making sure that I am creating accessible content for people with disabilities, but also for people in all sorts of walks of life that need the arts even though they can't go out, and share it, and be at their theater camp this summer, or go and participate or rehearse in a play, trying to bring that arts to the community, especially the dwarfism community in July 2020.

Sofiya Cheyenne:

My Dwarf Artist Coalition will be hosting five events. We're doing a musical jam sesh, a poetry night, a visual art online exhibition, and we're also doing a performance called, "Telephone," which we've been doing for the last three years, which is essentially a creative arts project that has all new works that have been created over the past 12 months all inspired by each other and new artists.

Sofiya Cheyenne:

This year's theme for Telephone is called, "Living In Oblivion," inspired by Peter Dinklage's monologue in the movie Living In Oblivion when he is a character in a dream. He is a dwarf of course as am I, and this is speaking to the idea of people with dwarfism, or people of short stature always being put in a place of mythical, fantastical, non-realistic dream like scenes. So hopefully, this year's theme for Telephone will prove to share and spread awareness about the fact that a lot of little people are just your average people, and they're doctors, they're nurses, they're essential workers, they're moms, and dads, and grandmas, and grandpas, and all the things that we all are as human beings.

Sofiya Cheyenne:

So, I'm rambling a little bit, but in this COVID pandemic time, in this nesting space of mine where I'm bringing a new person into the world and home, unfortunately unemployed, but working towards creating the forward movement of the world, and the forward action of the world, which will include, which must include inclusion and access, not only for the black community, for your people of color, but also for the disabled community.

Sofiya Cheyenne:

I'm really excited to see where we move forward and how we move out of this very, very trying times. That's about it. I've been working on a lot of things. I'm excited to continue to bring the work of inclusion and access into the education system, into the nonprofit sector, and into the arts, whenever the arts are able to come back. Hopefully, theater and film TV will have a life again. I'm sure that there are lots of creative people creating in these very trying times. I'm definitely one of them trying to stay creative, trying to stay positive, and trying to see the light at the end of the tunnel.

Sofiya Cheyenne:

Thanks for bringing me back, and I can't wait to hear all the rest of the episodes from all the awesome speakers and guests of Access Champions Podcast.

Alie B. Gorrie:

Thank you so much Sofiya for coming back and keeping us updated. We are so excited for everything that's in store for you, and we just cannot wait to keep updated on your journey and this new family life that you're about to have.

Alie B. Gorrie:

Now, let's throw back to your original episode. In this episode, we get to chat about Sofiya about your experience growing up in the arts as a little person, about how you became an advocate, and what you're doing in rehearsal rooms to change perceptions. I love this episode, and I can't wait to listen again. Enjoy everyone.

Philip Dallmann:

Hello, and welcome to the Access Champions Podcast. I'm your host, Philip Dallmann for this next adventure into The Galaxy of Accessibility and Inclusion. This week we have a tremendous guest, Sofiya Cheyenne. Sofiya is an actress and an advocate here in New York City, who also happens to be a little person. Sofiya and I met, actually, a couple weeks ago at a panel put together by ALMA NYC and Broadway Dance Center called "Remove the Fear, Make the Art," which was focused on this idea of this barrier that exists in the world of collaboration and creating collaborative art with artists with disabilities, the fear of not knowing proper language, not knowing how to communicate with someone that communicates a little bit differently, or what kind of supports you may need to provide, or just more in an accessible space or things like that.

Philip Dallmann:

So removing that barrier and creating that dialogue to open some really unique and interesting collaborations. It was a super fun panel to moderate. Last week's guest, Andrew Duff, was also on there and another gentleman, David Harrell, who's also an actor and advocate here in New York City was there. There's video of this. We'll link to it. It was really great, and shout-out to ALMA NYC for following through as they, over the last couple weeks, have been creating a piece with dancers who are deaf in addition to their company and opening their doors in that way to dancers of all abilities, so way to walk the walk, ALMA.

Philip Dallmann:

Sofiya though is, getting back to her, we just had a really great conversation and one of the things I took away from it and without spoiling too much, also, there is an Avengers spoiler in there, so if you haven't seen the movie, don't listen to this podcast without having seen the movie. One of the things that Sofiya really stuck with and lived with was this idea of humanity and how there's this struggle to have people who are considered whatever, able-body, fully abled, neurotypical, et cetera, to see individuals with differences as just humans, just see Sofiya, the actress, not see Sofiya, the little person who's an actress, and think of it that way.

Philip Dallmann:

That was really interesting to me, because I think that's a beautiful thought and a beautiful ideal that we should all strive for, right? We should all be looking for the humanity in everyone, even if we do disagree or have differences either physically or even politically or things like that, we need to look for the humanity in everyone. Just a really beautiful thought. That creates a segue, it's a weird segue in my brain, but to the Chicago Cultural Access Consortium, and the way that segue happened in my head was a gentleman named Evan Hatfield, who actually did the beta episode of this podcast for me.

Philip Dallmann:

He's the director of Audience Services at Steppenwolf, and he was at a panel here in New York presented by TDF a little more than a year ago, I guess now. He said, "On the other side of accessibility is someone's humanity," and that always really, really stuck with me and always in the last year, has really stuck with me.

Philip Dallmann:

The other hat that Evan wears is as part of the Chicago Cultural Access Consortium, and they're doing something super, super cool, a little more than a week away, I guess, on May 16th. There is a special staging at Steppenwolf of the short play, "Victory, by Ike Holter" directed by Molly Brennan. What makes this special is that it will actually be a workshop that demonstrates best and worst practices for presenting audio description, touch tours, ASL interpretation, open captioning, and sensory-friendly programming. That's amazing. It's a one-stop shop to learn what you should do, what you thought you should do but doesn't actually work, and what you should absolutely not do when creating access in all of these different ways, and what a great way to learn that without actually doing it incorrectly in your own institution first.

Philip Dallmann:

So shout-out to Chicago Cultural Access Consortium, Evan Hatfield, Christena Gunther, I'm sure Erica Foster's involved in this in some way who's also one of my favorite access champions out there. That whole group, including Christena Gunther, just a tremendous team out there doing tremendous work for not just the big guys out there in Chicago but everyone, the storefront theaters, the little guys that are just trying to start making tremendous work, they're helping the community at large become inclusive and accessible in a really educational, collaborative way.

Philip Dallmann:

So, that is something you should check out. I see there is a sign-up sheet. We'll link to that as well in the podcast and on all the social media to give that some love. So yeah, that's all we have in the intro today. Just another quick reminder, give us a follow on Twitter at Access Champion or on Facebook, The Access Champion Podcast. We are hoping to be on Spotify sooner rather than later. The process has taken longer than anticipated, but we are currently available on iTunes and SoundCloud, so give us a listen. If you take it, please subscribe.

Philip Dallmann:

Without further ado, Access Champion Sofiya Cheyenne. Hey, there we go.

Sofiya Cheyenne:

All right.

Philip Dallmann:

All right. Well, thank you, Sofiya, for joining us today on Episode Three of the Access Champions podcast.

Sofiya Cheyenne:

Thank you for having me. I'm really happy to be here.

Philip Dallmann:

It was great actually just meeting you a couple weeks ago at ALMA NYC's panel "Remove the Fear, Make the Art," with yourself, Andrew Duff, who was on last week's episode, and David Harrell, who I'm definitely going to get on here at some point because-

Sofiya Cheyenne:

Yeah.

Philip Dallmann:

... also great. Just hearing about little bit about your journey then was just super intriguing and then diving way deep in the Internet and seeing all the work that you've done also just incredibly exciting.

Sofiya Cheyenne:

Thanks. Thank you so much.

Philip Dallmann:

So, one of the first things we like to do on this podcast is for every Access Champion, there is an access origin story. I'd love to hear a little bit about your journey growing up and how you've found the arts and found your way into not only a maker of art, but an advocate as well.

Sofiya Cheyenne:

Yeah, great. Where do I begin? Well, when I was born, my parents are average height, which means that they're tall, and I'm a little person. I have dwarfism. When I was born, I was diagnosed with dwarfism, and as a result of that ... I had a wonderful doctor and he actually recommended that my parents put me in dance when I was a kid. When I was about two years old, I started dance class and I really fell in love with it, and that was the start of my passion for performing.

Sofiya Cheyenne:

I think that dance became this very interesting overlap of expression and healing and just having a place where I could be myself, and also, I had way more positive experiences in dance class than I did in school and other places. So, the arts was always this very positive thing in my life. So, yeah, really, since two, I haven't not been on the stage for that long, and it really started opening that for me. When I was a kid, I did dance competitions. I did the whole thing, recitals every year and my family would come and support and it was just very exciting to me. Love music. I think I've got some pretty good rhythm.

Sofiya Cheyenne:

So dance was really that first thing for me, and really, that opened up into musicals, which I saw my first show that really made me sit back live at my school when I was about 10 years old, and it was The Wizard of Oz. What's funny about that is that in The Wizard of Oz, there's munchkins in the show, and when I saw it, I did not ... I loved the story. I had fun listening to it, but I did not see myself as a munchkin, I saw myself as Dorothy, and it wasn't that it was the lead. It was just that she was this fun character that I was loving her story, and I was listening to it.

Sofiya Cheyenne:

So, I saw The Wizard of Oz, and the year after that, I joined the drama club at my school and that really came into me wanting to apply for high school, and so then I went to high school for performing arts, and there was when a lot of things started to change for me, because when I was a kid, it was tough. I was actually bullied a lot when I was a kid. I went to a Catholic high school for 10 years, so it was very different. Also, on a ethnicity level, I was really the only Hispanic girl in the class as well.

Philip Dallmann:

Interesting.

Sofiya Cheyenne:

Yeah, and so it was this very funny dyna- ... like a socially awkward thing that I was going through when I was a kid. When I went to high school, I went to public high school for performing arts, so it was like, "Whoa, this is a different world." It was beyond what I could have ever expected it to be, and I really learned my craft there. The passion just was always there. The passion for performing was always there, and I was encouraged by my parents all the time to continue it. So, it was very easy for me to always be doing that.

Sofiya Cheyenne:

When I auditioned for high school, one of my first auditions was for dance, because I applied for dance and acting. I did not get seen. I didn't get to show my choreography that I prepared because when I walked in the room, they were very shocked to see me, and instead of asking me to dance, they asked me to turn to all four corners of the wall and they just looked at my body, so they were like, "Okay, great. Turn right. Okay, turn right, turn right," and then they were like, "Okay, now walk this way, now walk that way. Okay, thank you so much." That was my first audition that I did as maybe 12, 13, right? About to go into high school, and dance is all I knew, and dance was where I was so comfortable.

Sofiya Cheyenne:

I will also point out that on that day, I was the only girl that showed up with a leotard and tights and ballet shoes and my hair back.

Philip Dallmann:

So, you clearly walked in, "I'm here prepared to dance."

Sofiya Cheyenne:

Yeah. I knew what to do, and I knew what I was going to do when I went there, but I wasn't even given a shot, and my best friend at the time actually got a callback and she did really well, and I was super happy for her, but it was the first time where I was like, "I don't understand." I was very confused by it. I didn't understand why I wouldn't be considered. It didn't really hit me, obviously, until later, until I really matured and learned about this industry and how cutthroat it can be, and how harsh it can be, but that was my first experience, about 12 years old, and it was really intense.

Sofiya Cheyenne:

I was really upset. I cried my eyes out for a little while, but it was okay because I auditioned for the next one. I really wanted to get into a school. To make a long story short, I ended up going to the professional performing arts school here in Manhattan, which is PPAS, for short, is what they call it, and it was

amazing and it was such a great program. At that point, I was never really considered different. Everyone was different in that school. Everyone brought their own funky vibe, and then that journey led me to college.

Sofiya Cheyenne:

So as far as performing goes in my life, it's always been there. It's always been a passion of mine. I never really thought about it as a career until I actually did this competition. I was nominated for a competition. It's called, "The Kennedy Center American ..." No? Yup. Let me try that again. It's called, "The Kennedy Center American College Theater Festival." KCACTF. Anyway, make a long story short ... I know I say that a lot, sorry. I did that festival and it was the first time where I got all the way to the finals. I went there my first year. I got all the way through the finals.

Philip Dallmann:

This is for what type of performance?

Sofiya Cheyenne:

For acting.

Philip Dallmann:

For acting.

Sofiya Cheyenne:

Sorry, I'm shifting. Well yeah, because what happened was I went to school for acting after from high school and college and all that stuff, and I did this competition and it was ... I got all the way to the finals, and I was like, "Wow, these strangers actually think I'm pretty good. That's intense. That's really cool," and so it really threw away all the fear and I was like, "You know what? I just want to do this because I love it and people seem to like it too," and there we are. So I really after that, decided to pursue it as a career.

Sofiya Cheyenne:

This whole time, my whole life in performance, I never really grappled with the idea of types and stigmas and all the obstacles I would come across. So, that's the long story of the beginning, and then how we get to the advocacy is when I was in college, I did a show and I was cast as the lead. It was very controversial that I was the lead because this was a show that was iconic and the character was supposed to look a certain way, and I don't look that way, so that was already controversial.

Sofiya Cheyenne:

Then I asked someone, I forgot exactly who, but I was like, "Hey, can my friend in a wheelchair come see the show? Because I know that it's in the basement and I'm just not sure." They were like, "Uh ... " and they didn't really have an answer for me, and-

Philip Dallmann:

Generally, that long pause means no.

Sofiya Cheyenne:

Yeah. So, what ended up happening was is that my love for performing and my need to advocate collided in this moment that I really, at the time, I think about it now and my heart's racing because it was such a trying time. It was this big role and all you want to do in school is just do well and get through it, you know?

Philip Dallmann:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Sofiya Cheyenne:

I was tasked with this obstacle and this advocacy that I had to either take or not take, and so I did take it, and I fought, because I was like, "Well, that's illegal. You can't have a theater space that isn't accessible, so what are you going to do about it?" Then it became this back and forth thing. That was really the moment where my advocacy and my performing collided, and honestly, after that point, I have not been able to unsee the ignorance, the stigma, and all those things involved, so I feel like I answered that question in a really weird way.

Philip Dallmann:

No, but that's absolutely true, and that's I think your journey into advocacy is not dissimilar from many folks is when that curtain is opened, to use The Wizard of Oz reference, when one set's revealed, you can't unsee the man behind the curtain. You can't unsee that injustice. I feel like I've had that experience many times over with a variety of different kind of access where you're not necessarily always thinking about mobility access if mobility access doesn't influence your day-to-day.

Philip Dallmann:

I just remember walking to a theater here in New York and seeing a sign that said, "Wheelchair users can use the bathroom across the street," and I couldn't unsee that and go, "Oh, that's classy. That's good." It was a theater that had enough money to have an accessible restroom. So yeah, I definitely relate to that. As you've kinda dealt with not only the harsh realities of accessibility in that situation, but you were also developing the harsh realities of the performing industry, and how superficial it can be a lot of the time.

Philip Dallmann:

As you made that transition from, because there was that transition from student to professional and diving into that world. What was that like as you made that leap?

Sofiya Cheyenne:

Like I said before, all my experiences with performing, for the most part, were super positive all the time. I was very encouraged by people and I loved it. When I started to think about myself as an artist in the world, I also started to think about who else out there looks like me, and I couldn't really find many people, and so it really got me thinking who's my role model? Who is my "type?"

Sofiya Cheyenne:

Actually, I was given this assignment at school to do before I graduated, and it was so frustrating, because I was like, "I don't know who else looks like me. Am I the only one? I don't understand. Why is it so complicated?" I did realize that there are a lot of men that are little people that are out there acting.

It feels like the women out there are doing more impersonation stuff and not really character-acting or performance art in that way.

Sofiya Cheyenne:

It's been a weird journey, because with that knowledge of not having someone that you can follow their career, I feel like I'm the lead or I'm trying to navigate what this looks like for the first time. What I've come across is just like anybody in the entertainment industry, there's all these types and stigmas that you fit into. So as a little person, it's really tough because most of the time, the roles that are bountiful are elf, leprechaun, mystical creature-like, non-human roles.

Sofiya Cheyenne:

When people have these scripts that have very out-there ideas that are about human issues, but through a non-human perspective it's like, "Call on a dwarf." That's the reality, and that's how it feels sometimes.

Philip Dallmann:

I think that's probably absolutely accurate.

Sofiya Cheyenne:

Yeah. So with that knowledge, it's knowing your worth, I think. Like I said before, I've been fortunate enough to have a lot of support in my life with my performing. I've had family members that are like, "Are you sure you want to do this?" Just like everyone does, but for the most part, I've always known it and it's knowing your worth and it's knowing that when you go in the room, what you're showing is your skill and your ability to be memorable and make an impactful moment with whatever story you're telling.

Sofiya Cheyenne:

I really try to go into every experience not knowing the ignorance, not knowing any of that stuff, because I want to trust that the person in the room that I'm auditioning for is on my side, and so I always go in there with that attitude. I really feel like that's the attitude that works for me, and that's been working for me in my career so far. I go in there and I'm no nonsense. I'm like, "Look. This is what it is. This is who I am and I'm going to give an awesome audition. Are you ready for it?"

Sofiya Cheyenne:

You just have to go in there with the guts like that and really take that on. There's been roles where I've tried and been successful at talking with the director and helping them maybe think of a role in a different way. If this scene is leaning towards the funny side, what if I tell you she's not funny? What if I tell you she's sexy or she's laid back? Because most of the time with little people, it feels like the genre is comedy and it's always this comic relief, and I'm all about comedy. I mean, I love that, but when is it not the butt of the joke?

Philip Dallmann:

Yeah. No, I was actually just thinking about it the other day. I saw a thing on TV and that utilized a little person in that way and I just thought, "That doesn't need to be the joke anymore."

Sofiya Cheyenne:

Right.

Philip Dallmann:

Be better. Be more creative was frankly the thought that I had. I just feel like it's a tired trope at this point, and vice versa, I, just this morning, went and saw The Avengers, which Mr. Dinklage is in in a very dramatic turn, and a turn of I guess, inverted thinking. They've played him as a giant in it, which, well, I guess I should have said "spoiler alert" if you haven't seen The Avengers. I'm terrible at that. Hopefully, all of our listeners have seen The Avengers or just don't care about The Avengers.

Philip Dallmann:

I saw it, and I was like, "Hey, this is great. This is different. I didn't expect this." Yeah.

Sofiya Cheyenne:

I think that there are so many creative ways to implement, if you want to talk about size, fine, but there are better and more creative ways and more, in all honestly, story-driven ways that could be impactful if you're using someone that's unique, different, small, very tall, whatever you want to go with, disabled, people that have different abilities, disabilities. I don't know how I feel about that word. It's like, I love the word, but I don't love the word.

Philip Dallmann:

Which word?

Sofiya Cheyenne:

Disability.

Philip Dallmann:

Disability? Okay.

Sofiya Cheyenne:

Feeling like we need a new word, but I don't know, and no matter what word you choose, it all sucks because it's saying that it's separate or different. So anyway, that's a little side thought.

Philip Dallmann:

No. It's so funny. Language is I think a recurring theme in this work, and because it's constantly changing, right?

Sofiya Cheyenne:

Yeah.

Philip Dallmann:

Because we're all searching for that thing that feels right. I would agree with you, I think this language that feels separate or segregated, it makes me twitch a little bit, and you're like, "That's a little hard on the ear. It doesn't seem correct." This idea of inclusion should include inclusive language.

Sofiya Cheyenne:

Right.

Philip Dallmann:

I don't obviously have the answer either. I've often thought that a bunch of advocates just need to sit down with a marketing team, because that's what they're good at and just go through it.

Sofiya Cheyenne:

Absolutely.

Philip Dallmann:

We were talking about a similar thing not too long ago in the world of autism-friendly, sensory-friendly, relaxed performances, those kind of things, and, and looking for that like, what's the language, which is the non-exclusive, completely inclusive language. That was my same suggestion. I was like, "Let's just get a bunch of occupational therapists in a room with some marketing press folks and figure it out," but someone has to pay for that.

Sofiya Cheyenne:

Right. Yeah, I agree. I hate even saying that it has to be correct. In general right now, a lot of things are on eggshells with how we say things and what we need to say to not offend people, protect people, or feel good about ourselves, too. I think that at the end of the day, it's about humans. It's about being a human being and I really try and I feel like I have to try very hard when I do my work, when I perform, when I meet people to tell them and remind them that I'm human, and that reminding can sometimes be very exhausting. I am a very optimistic person and I really do believe that people will listen, and I do believe that people will switch and shift, but you have to give them a chance to do it.

Sofiya Cheyenne:

There's that level of advocacy and awareness that's really important when we're talking. As an artist and as a performer, we have the ability to really, I believe, change perspective because of exposure. Now, more so than ever, 2018 is the year of writing for me. I've been writing so much because the last two years, I've been going to meetings and just meeting people in the industry that are under the disability umbrella, and everyone's like, "There's no content. There's no content. How are we going to get cast if we can't be seen or whatever?"

Sofiya Cheyenne:

I'm like, "Well, we need to write, so let's write." I'm starting to write and I feel really good about it because it feels right to me too. We'll see where that journey takes me, but it's the journey of inclusion for sure, and just a full heart and a full world of compassion and understanding.

Philip Dallmann:

Yeah, that's advice that I was actually given very early on, is that if you don't see the work that you want, go create it. It was so simple. It was said to me when I was 14, so I couldn't grasp it at that age, but it's something I've gone back to over time, when you don't see ... This podcast is a product of that. I was like, "I would love an hour to sit down and listen to some of the folks that I ... or similar to the folks that

I've been meeting over the years and that are doing great work, but it didn't exist." So I was like, "Let's just go do the thing."

Sofiya Cheyenne:

Yeah.

Philip Dallmann:

Which that's so great that similarly, you are taking up the mantle and saying, "You know what? What I'm looking for is not here, so I'm going to go ahead and create it." That leads us to there is a play in development, right?

Sofiya Cheyenne:

There is a play.

Philip Dallmann:

There's a play. Tell us a little bit about it.

Sofiya Cheyenne:

Sure. I would love to. The story that I told earlier, which was actually the show where advocacy and art came together for me. During that show, I got very close with that director, and so that director and myself are co-writers on this piece. Her name's Kristy Dodson. Yeah, so she really came to me with an idea to write a story for me with a female, little person in the story. Really to jump ahead, we ended up realizing I needed to write it. We both needed to write it together, and now it's been a few years, and we're at the point where we're going to do a public reading of it in front of the little people community that will be at the Little People of America Convention in Orlando this July, which is super exciting.

Sofiya Cheyenne:

The story is about a couple that's trying to have a child. Each person in the couple has dwarfism, different kinds of dwarfism. It's specific about what kind, but it's not really specific. You'd understand that if you saw it. At the end of the day, it's also about being a parent, living your life and trying to live your life just like anyone else, and knowing what love is and how powerful love can be. So yeah, I'm very excited about it. I'm very passionate about sharing the story, because as far as the little person community is concerned, it speaks on a lot of issues that our community deals with in a subtle way, in a funny way, I hope, and things like that. So I'm really excited to get the feedback on that. It's still a little baby, learning how to walk, but it's happening.

Philip Dallmann:

That's a hell of a beta test, though bringing it to the convention.

Sofiya Cheyenne:

Thanks.

Philip Dallmann:

That's amazing. No, and when you are telling a story about a specific culture and a specific community, it's so important to involve that community.

Sofiya Cheyenne:

Absolutely. Yeah.

Philip Dallmann:

So, kudos

Philip Dallmann:

Sofiya Cheyenne: Absolutely. Kudos to you for taking it there, specifically to do that, for sure. Yeah, I think that's amazing.

Sofiya Cheyenne:

Thanks. It just feels like it's the right time to do it now and it needs to get out there now. The sooner I can get the most feedback and then put it out there, and I'm very excited, and like I said, the role of writer is new to me, but it's exciting.

Philip Dallmann:

Now, you have another role within the convention, correct?

Sofiya Cheyenne:

Yeah. Yeah, I do. I'm the Chair of the Dwarf Artist Coalition, which is a subgroup of our organization, and really it's a group for artists to convene. Little People of America, which is LPA for short, so we'll call it LPA. LPA has a lot of events surrounded by sports and athletics, but not much with art. I've seen that gap there, and my mission is to really include as many artists, young, old, anybody in the community that's interested in art, and eventually have workshops for them, have training, and really create a community of networking, but also because of, especially as a performance artist, but anybody, really.

Sofiya Cheyenne:

If you're a person with dwarfism and you're out there in the arts industry, there's a lot of obstacles that you're up against, and who else better to talk to about it than your own community? I'm really trying to foster that group in that community and I'm very excited about it, and it has been growing. So yeah. It's all good. I'm very excited about it.

Philip Dallmann:

You were telling me a little bit earlier, before we started recording about a project that you guys have done this year that sounds amazing.

Sofiya Cheyenne:

Yeah. We're titling the project "Looking Back and Looking Ahead." Basically, it's like your childhood game, "Telephone," but instead of a message being passed from one person to another, it's actually new art that's being created. We're starting with a piece that's called, "Ecce Homo," which was actually created by a man called Bruce Johnson. He passed away a few years back, but he created the Dwarf Artist Coalition. This is in honor of him. A lot of people have told me so many amazing things about him and how he was just such a good advocate.

Sofiya Cheyenne:

These are like the role models like I'm talking about that I feel like I'm missing in my life. We're using that as our, first inspiration point, and the first person goes and they create a piece, so the first thing was a monologue, and then added to that is a dance piece, and then that dance piece gets passed to the musician, and then the musician creates a song, and so on and so forth.

Sofiya Cheyenne:

There's new art being created all year, and this July, we'll be presenting everything. It'll be a combination of poetry, dance, performance, photo series, music. It's going to be great. It's going to be really fun.

Philip Dallmann:

That's absolutely amazing.

Sofiya Cheyenne:

Yeah.

Philip Dallmann:

What a great concept of just passing the art and letting the artists interpret the story and then pass it along. Hopefully you guys will share something out there.

Sofiya Cheyenne:

Yes, I will. Absolutely.

Philip Dallmann:

Because I think, man, to see that kind of journey across all art forms is amazing.

Sofiya Cheyenne:

Everyone lives all over the country, so I'm contacting them from all different parts, and yeah. It's going to be really amazing because at the end of the day, we're going to have about eight or nine new pieces of art that were all created within our community, and we're inspiring each other. In order for us to have any progress happen, any change happen, our community needs to be strong. I feel like there's so many new things happening with our community, which is exciting, and this is one of them, so I'm really excited about it.

Philip Dallmann:

Do you feel like these type of projects also help connect everyone and start building that infrastructure for the support system that you're talking about?

Sofiya Cheyenne:

Yeah, I do. I really do. I think it's a huge source of connection. In all honesty, what I also hope is that this art can foster conversations about things that maybe we are afraid to talk about too within our own community. Because there's so many things that we could really use help on, that we don't have, that we don't talk about because we are a small community and it's hard. This world is harsh and there's a lot of ignorance out there.

Sofiya Cheyenne:

For example, just like medical concerns, health insurance kind of things, having adaptive equipment in general, all this art, whether it speaks on it or not, it can foster a conversation about our culture and how we live, and hopefully, that comes to something else that comes to something else. So I'm really excited about it.

Philip Dallmann:

Yeah, I think it's absolutely amazing. So that's part of your summer.

Sofiya Cheyenne:

It is part of my summer, yeah. Lots of things.

Philip Dallmann:

We also just spoke briefly about you have another exciting project coming up in the next month.

Sofiya Cheyenne:

Yeah. This is a really good example of having a role that I feel like you have to put your own spin on. I'm going to Texas for a month and we're doing guys and dolls there, and it's really exciting. The character I auditioned for, it calls for a very tall, big, intimidating, "intimidating with size" character. So here's Sofiya. She's coming in. Okay, great. So obviously they're thinking of doing something different and I'm all for that. I'm all for the creative, bending rules' thing but for me, it's always about making sure that it's legit. It's a legit choice that that's meaningful to the story and it's not there to make fun of, because-

Philip Dallmann:

They don't want it to be the punchline.

Sofiya Cheyenne:

Yeah, exactly. I know that with this particular character, with the fact that if people go there and they know the show and they know that this person's supposed to be "really big", right? That might be funny to some people. I know that that's a fact of this performance, but when I go there and I do perform it, I intend on giving it every bit of full, just a fullness in the character that doesn't make it only about the joke, that it's about something else too. That's really important to me.

Sofiya Cheyenne:

There's been a lot of experiences where I feel like I've had to go in the room and try to teach a director how to incorporate someone like me into a story. Sometimes there's days where you don't want to do that. You don't want to advocate. You don't want to-

Philip Dallmann:

Yeah, you just want to be Sofiya, the actress.

Sofiya Cheyenne:

I just want to go in there and do the work, but you have to pick and choose your battles and you have to know what's helpful. Because also, really, at the end of the day, when you're talking about difference,

and you're talking about different experience, people are just so afraid to admit that they don't know or that they aren't sure how to navigate the situation, and because of that fear, you have all this weird tension and apologies and overcompensation. That's unnecessary energy.

Sofiya Cheyenne:

If you go in there as a performer, as an advocate, and you say, "This is me. This is who I am and this is what I bring to the table." I think that's a win. I think that's a win.

Philip Dallmann:

I would agree. I think that the projects that are more collaborative in general tend to be more open to those conversations. Frankly, I think they're more successful in general. Obviously, we've talked, you've said that you've had to have different conversations with directors and things like that. Can you give me one or if you have a lot, we can talk about a lot of good, like what were the good experiences that you've had, the really great artistic opportunities that have come along?

Sofiya Cheyenne:

Great. I have to admit that as you asked that question, I'm like, "The list is getting smaller and smaller and smaller. I don't say that for like, "Oh, man, that's sad." It really is a reality because I don't think that there's not one show that I've ever done where I haven't had to do some advocacy or some awareness teaching, right? But when it's received in the positive way that it should be received, that's when real change and real progress is happening.

Sofiya Cheyenne:

I recently did a show, and it's very interesting because people do these things without knowing them, and everything that I'm talking about today is so specific to my experience as a little person because that's what I know. Here's a story. So, I do a show and it's going great and everyone's super ... It's super diverse. I'm like, "This is the most diverse thing I've ever been a part of. It's so cool."

Sofiya Cheyenne:

Eventually, as I get to my scene and we're doing a song that I'm doing, I notice that there's a hint of circus music in the back of this song that I'm singing and I don't remember it being in the original score, and it was added in, and it was just a very jarring thing that I noticed, and it was very weird, and I was like, "huh." So my insecurities start flying at me, and they're like, "Are they doing the circus thing because you're a little person? Are they trying to say something about freaks? Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, right? It's all this stuff that's coming at me.

Sofiya Cheyenne:

I did end up saying something, just mentioning it as a way of, "Hey, I didn't notice that before. I'm just curious why it's in there." No one ever admitted anything of what I was thinking, which is fine because it probably wasn't malicious at all, but what ended up happening was, it was taken out of the song. I think that, like I said, there are collaborators that are willing to listen, that are willing to think twice about a choice that might have been funny for a second, but they're like, "Oh, wait. That's a bad idea."

Sofiya Cheyenne:

I have to believe that people can learn and can evolve, because if I don't believe that, then I am against a wall every day. I'm also a teaching artist and I do a lot of advocacy in the classroom. A lot. The kids that I teach are mean and cruel, but I love them, but they-

Philip Dallmann:

That is said every parent ever and teacher ever. My children, my students are the meanest. They're the worst, but I love them to death. That's so funny.

Sofiya Cheyenne:

Yeah. I do and also, I work in a very unique case where I sometimes switch from school to school or I'm in short-term things and I meet new kids all the time, and advocacy is a big part of that.

Sofiya Cheyenne:

One time, I did a show and someone came up to me afterwards and they were like ... because I had hung out with them for another 20 minutes after. They were so grateful that I was talking to them, and they were like, "You didn't have to talk to me, but you did and that was really nice," and she goes, "You know what? You really believe people will listen." She goes, "You really believe people will listen to you," and I was like, "I do. I really do because I have to. I have to." The more I say it out loud, the more I'm like, "That's my survival," is really believing that there is a possible shift in someone that can happen.

Sofiya Cheyenne:

Because the amount of times that I deal with ignorance on a daily basis when I walk out on the streets of Manhattan and it's either a photo being taken of me, or a pointing and laughing situation, or a name-calling situation, it happens every day, folks. It does. If I get angry, if I want to lash out on every person, it'd be too much. It would be exhausting. So you just have to live your life with that positivity and that willingness to trust that there is possible learning that could happen. I really do believe that.

Philip Dallmann:

Yeah. I think the thing that you mentioned earlier in the podcast and that you brought up on the panel is this idea of humanity.

Sofiya Cheyenne:

Yeah.

Philip Dallmann:

Just that conversion of getting ... because it is ignorance. You spend 10 minutes or 10 seconds with any other human, you understand they are human, and if it's just lack of exposure that's for the reason that you're not seeing it that way, but that idea of opening people's eyes to like, "Hey, I'm just Sofiya. Human actress."

Sofiya Cheyenne:

Yeah.

Philip Dallmann:

Is I think important. It's a really grounded idea that I think obviously, you've had some success with it, and I think that makes a lot of sense.

Sofiya Cheyenne:

I think so. I can't take all the credit because I married an amazing man. He is a little person as well, but he's helped me a lot process this industry, because obviously, you go home, you talk it out, right? I really learned a lot from how he works, his work ethic. He's in finance, but how he operates his daily day, he's like, "Do the work. You do the work, you show up, and people can't ignore that. They can't. That's so true. It's about all those things, and we have to be willing to trust that people will listen and people will hear, and it's, yeah. Yeah.

Philip Dallmann:

Great. I think that's absolutely accurate and I think that that transcends a lot of things. You really do have to believe that people will listen and people can change, especially in our current climate, I feel like, not to get too political here, but to say that you've got to have that hope that there can be a conversation rather than just an argument.

Sofiya Cheyenne:

There's so many hard experiences I've had because of being a little person, I've had to have a lot of surgery, I've had to be away from school for a certain amount of time. I've had to bounce from hospital to hospital. These things, they're part of my life. They've definitely impacted who I am, but I cannot be angry at these things. People sometimes ask, "Oh, if you could be tall for a day, would you?" I'm like, "Yeah, for a day." I don't see any value in being any taller. This is all I know. It doesn't feel like it's something that's ... I'm losing from. Yeah. So, I don't know why I said that.

Philip Dallmann:

No. I think that's, it's again, another interesting thing. I think that is something I've heard from many folks of different sizes, different abilities, et cetera. This is similar to, I would say the same thing, I wouldn't change anything about myself. I'd love to be six foot five some days. There are other days that like, absolutely not. I'm an AP, a terminology I learned early today.

Sofiya Cheyenne:

AP means average height person. LP means, little person, FYI.

Philip Dallmann:

I just think LP is one of the greatest acronyms. It just sounds so OG. Yeah, I think the more we can all sit around and just go, "You know what? We're exactly correct and our journey is our journey and that makes us an amazing contributor to humanity at large." Whether we're an artist, or whether we're in finance, or whether we're in medicine or whatever we're doing, I think whatever, who we are, we're bringing something to this world, and it's important exactly how we uniquely bring it.

Sofiya Cheyenne:

Yeah.

Philip Dallmann:

I think you've definitely shown that in your art and in your advocacy that you are bringing something very unique. Obviously there were advocates before you, but you bring such a unique perspective because again, as you came up, you didn't have necessarily the female role model within your community in the specific way that you were looking for it, and you're filling that role in so many ways. I know you're semi-active on the Film Festival Circuit, yes?

Sofiya Cheyenne:

Yeah. Yes.

Philip Dallmann:

So tell me a little bit about that.

Sofiya Cheyenne:

Sure. I've just recently created a short film. That's the first time I've produced, shot, directed, written, and acted.

Philip Dallmann:

So, the whole damn thing.

Sofiya Cheyenne:

The whole thing. The whole kit and caboodle. It was really fun. It was for the Easterseals Disability Film Challenge, which is a film challenge that I believe is about a few years old, maybe eight or six years old. I could be wrong on that, but what's cool about it is it has been growing as the years have progressed, because the first year, it was just a few people making some films because they had a weekend and that was it, but it's really gotten a lot of claim.

Sofiya Cheyenne:

I wrote a story about a very common experience I have with another little person female that lives here in New York, and we always bump into each other at auditions. It's like, "Oh, no, this one's yours." "No, this one's yours." We're super supportive of each other. She was a bridesmaid at my wedding. She's a very close friend of mine. That's an experience that's super unique to us. As far as we know, the only two female LPs in New York City going at it and doing the hustle, and we always bump into each other. It was like one little blurb of a moment in that life, which was really fun.

Sofiya Cheyenne:

The film got so many views and hopefully we get some award or some recognition for it, because it was so much fun to do.

Philip Dallmann:

Is it available still online?

Sofiya Cheyenne:

It is. It's available. If you go on YouTube or Facebook, and you look up the Easterseals Disability Film Challenge, my film is entitled, "You're Up," as in you're next or you're up. Yeah, check it out.

Philip Dallmann:

Yeah, and we'll definitely have the link to that on all the social media posts with this episode as well, so we'll definitely have that there.

Sofiya Cheyenne:

Cool. Thank you.

Philip Dallmann:

So one of the things I like to do as part of this podcast is it's a very ... The idea is to shine a light, right? That's my goal in general, shine a light on unique stories, unique work being done, but I also like to give the guests an opportunity to shine a light on any work that they're seeing that they want to give a shout-out to or any person that's doing some work that you find incredibly interesting or powerful or what have you. Is there any person or organization that's doing work that you want to give a little love to?

Sofiya Cheyenne:

Oh my God, that's such a good question. Well, at the moment, I have to say that in general in the industry, it really is feeling like baby steps towards a better, more inclusive circle. I was just at the Actors' Equity meeting this past Monday for diversity and inclusive hiring, and there's so many amazing things on the forefront of people's minds, of what they want things to look like. I feel like everyone who's in it is doing it, and I'm happy to be part of that. As far as personal friends, I mean, I have to give a shout-out now to my girl, Sarah Folkins, because she's the other little person in that film, and she is an amazing, brilliant actress that her and I are similar and so different, and I think it's so amazing.

Sofiya Cheyenne:

The fact that we are both little women, around the same age, in New York, and we are both working at the same time doing different things. That means a lot. That means a lot. So, that's super exciting. I'll give another shout-out on my education side, with a company I work with called, "Enact." That's E-N-A-C-T. Do you know Enact?

Philip Dallmann:

A little bit. Yeah.

Sofiya Cheyenne:

Okay, cool. They do amazing work. They do drama therapy-based work with kids, a lot of at-risk youth, drop-out prevention stuff. I really believe in the work, and I do it, and anytime I'm in one of those classes, there's always some impact that's being made on the youth. At the end of the day guys, the youth is what it's about. We need to help our younger generation understand what it means to accept everything and all people and really see the human in everybody and not the boxes that we decide to check off. Yeah.

Philip Dallmann:

Fantastic. Well, thank you again, Sofiya for coming on the podcast. You are welcome back any time.

Sofiya Cheyenne:

Thank you so much. Oh my goodness.

Alie B. Gorrie:

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you to Sofiya Cheyenne for joining us again here at the Access Champions Podcast. We are so thankful to learn from you, to hear your updates, and to cheer you on every step of your journey. Thank you so much, Sofiya. Big thank you as well to our listeners. If you're tuning in today and you're really curious about how to learn more, if you want to grow your disability knowledge or your inclusion knowledge, feel free to follow us on Patreon. For as little as a dollar a month, you'll have access to so much bonus content, interviews, swag and so much more.

Alie B. Gorrie:

Visit us at www.patreon.com/accesschampions. As always, I have to thank our incredible fierce team. Our executive producer, Matt, Phil who this podcast's brainchild. He works so tirelessly in the fields of access and inclusion. Phil, your work does not go unnoticed. Thanks to Jay, your intern, and for your work across social media lines. Thanks to Justin Campbell for the art, Tommy Karr for logos, Erica Dawson, Austin for our awesome music, and of course, Ms. Kelsey Rose Brown for her drawings and illustrations.

Alie B. Gorrie:

We will be back again soon, friends. We are going to have some Access Champion Podcast rewinds all summer long. So stay tuned for updates and so much more. As always Inclusion Believers, never stop running through that brick wall.