

Birdability

Disability Exchange Season 4 Episode 1

Judy Warth: Hey all! Welcome to Season 4 of Disability Exchange. We are so excited to have you back. We've lined up some discussions from the arts, from nature, from our systems, and from our people all through the disability lens.

This year is going to be our best. So please join us. Share with your colleagues, your friends and your communities. I'm excited today to turn our show over to hosts Mike Hoenig and Laury Scheidler.

(musical interlude)

Mike Hoenig: Hey, everybody, my name is Mike Hoenig. I am a program coordinator with Iowa's University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities, otherwise known as UCEDD. We host Disability Exchange, which is a podcast focused on centering and elevating the voices of people with disabilities and their allies.

I'm a nature person. I love being outdoors. And so I'm really excited to learn about our guests and the work that she and others are doing to make a particular outdoor activity accessible to people with disabilities.

But before we introduce her, I would like to welcome our cohost, those of you that may have watched season 2 will recognize her. She has graciously agreed to come back and serve as cohost for today's episode and she is Lori Scheidler.

Laury Scheidler: Thank you Mike. I'm Laury Scheidler, and I'm also a program coordinator with the UCED. I'm excited to join you today.

Mike Hoenig: Joanna our producer met our guests recently and learned about Birdability. Cat Fribley, we'd like to welcome you to Disability Exchange.

Cat Fribley: Thank you, much gratitude for the opportunity to talk about Birdability, our work, and how it fits right in with the community building you all are doing around disability justice and disability pride.

Mike Hoenig: Tell us a little bit about Birdability. What your goals are and how it specifically connects to our missions?

Cat Fribley: Absolutely. Birdability is a nonprofit organization. Our founder, Virginia Rose, is a woman who had a horseback riding accident at 14 and has used a manual wheelchair for the last 50 years. She calls birding ‘her avenue to her best self.’

And in discovering birding in her 40s, no less, she looked around and thought, ‘gosh, it's really rare for me to see folks with visible disabilities on the trail. I rarely ever see them. And that's when I actually get on the trail when there aren't impediments or barriers that are stopping me from being able to access trails and outdoor spaces and bird blinds.’

So, Virginia Rose began cataloging sites that were accessible to her in her manual wheelchair; got really involved with Travis Audubon, which is her chapter of Audubon in Austin, Texas, and as they started talking more and doing more collaboration around education, around disability and access to natural spaces, she was invited to speak to the National Audubon Society.

She told them about this experience that she had of going to parks and sites all over her community and cataloging what the access features were for herself and for some of her friends. Because while she uses a manual wheelchair, she had a dear friend who was also a birder who used a power wheelchair, and his needs were different.

As she was talking about that and shared her desire for something like that across the entire country, one of the National Audubon developers came to her and said, ‘Virginia, I think we can make this happen.’ And that was in, I want to say 2018, 2019, which is when Birdability really was born.

That collaboration led to the Birdability map, I'll talk a little bit more about that, but overall, the goal of Birdability is to help create accessible birding sites. Public lands, parks, trails nature conservancies, land trusts that are accessible to folks with disabilities and to work with all of those public lands on enhancing their accessibility where possible through advocacy and education.

And then also to work to introduce birding to folks with disabilities who often may not have thought of themselves as able to access birding or thought of themselves as birders. I know when I started birding, I was really hesitant to call myself a birder. I don't know if that resonates for anybody else, but I would never say, ‘Oh, I'm a birder.’ I would just say, ‘Oh, I enjoy birds. I really love watching them. I go out seeking to observe them and hear them.’ I had this vision of a birder as this incredibly fit person dripping in like scopes and

cameras and with their life list off to find rarities here, there and everywhere and that just wasn't my experience of birding.

My experience of birding was the distinct joy it gives me to see, hear, and otherwise observe and be in relationship with wild birds. And so our goal at Birdability is to help create that access for folks with disabilities.

Laury Scheidler: That's incredible Kat. I love that you guys are advocating for accessibility out there. Do you have an example of one of the times that you advocated at a birding site?

Cat Fribley: I can't tell you how many times I've heard people say, 'Oh my goodness! Thank you for this work to, for example, have more benches placed.' This is one of the major ones, Lori. A really key way of creating more access for more people in an outdoor space is seating opportunities.

Benches in particular, so that folks who have chronic fatigue, folks who have mobility issues, folks who are struggling because of pulmonary issues, all kinds of things have that space to be able to rest in between their forays into the natural world. But once we started advocating for that, it became clear how much that sort of piece of universal design actually impacts the whole world.

Folks who were pushing strollers, people who had grumpy joints or new joints, had just maybe had a knee replacement, who don't identify necessarily as having a disability. But who certainly, in that moment, had an access need that was met right by this particular intervention or enhancement. Often in our work doing education and advocacy parks and other officials with public lands are surprised at how small of a change can make a really large difference.

The Birdability map, doesn't say, 'Oh, this site is accessible, and this site isn't.' Instead, what we say is, 'here are the access features at any given site' because, as we know disability is such a broad spectrum it's impossible for us to say, 'Oh, this site is accessible' and have that be true across people who use mobility aids, people who use wheelchairs, people who are blind, people who are deaf, people who have other sensory disabilities.'

So it's really important to us that when we're thinking about access and access features, that our primary goal is to get as specific as possible about what kinds of things make spaces, outdoor spaces, especially accessible to different people with disabilities and other health concerns,

Mike Hoenig: That's great. Could you give us a few examples of some other features that you incorporate into your map?

Cat Fribley: Absolutely! The map is crowd sourced. This is what makes it I think so incredible. We currently have about 1800 sites on the map across the country and in 15 other countries, and those sites have all been submitted by folks across the country who experience the site and then fill out a checklist.

We ask folks to get familiar with what we call our access considerations document. It's on our website, which is birdability.org and that document goes through things like physical accessibility, slope and grade and ramps and maintenance, which you wouldn't often think of, but is a really key thing.

If a path is difficult, incredibly flat, and usable for someone in for let's say a power wheelchair, but it's covered in leaves or snow or fallen twigs. It makes it that much more inaccessible.

But also then we ask them to be able to report back on things like signage. Is there really good signage? Does it have Braille? Does it have audio components? Is it in languages other than English? How much information about the site or the trail is available ahead of time?

We often say, 'you don't know before you go.' And at the same time, the more information that I have as someone with a disability, the more likely it is that I'm going to have a successful trip. If I know it's a three-mile loop versus a half mile out and back, that tells me a little bit of information about what to expect, how to pace myself, those sorts of things.

If it can also tell me it's a quiet space, there aren't a lot of ambient noises, for example, if there were loud trains or a roller dam with that loud water sometimes can be really disconcerting for folks.

We ask questions about the physical aspects of the space, amenities. Do you have accessible bathrooms? Are there gender-neutral bathrooms? Are those bathrooms available only at a visitor center so then you can only use them during open hours?

So they have a we have a checklist with all of these access considerations and then we also just say. 'Tell us anything else you think is important.' As we heard from folks more and more, some of the things that then got it got incorporated into the checklist became things like, is there hate speech nearby?

Are there other sorts of things that would make it feel unsafe? Because when we are thinking about disability, we are thinking about it in as intersectional a way as possible. And folks who have disabilities have many other intersecting identities that we also want to be able to incorporate into the checklist and talk about the safety overall of a site, right?

Not just, 'Is it going to be safe for you to traverse it?' Because there is, for example, a guide rope along the trail, but also is it going to be safe for you to traverse it in that? Is there lighting? Are there other people nearby? All of those kinds of things that help folks make decisions about what's accessible for them.

Laury Scheidler: That's wonderful. What I'm hearing is they can go to your website, they can access this map and then click on a location of interest in a particular state, and it then gives you a list of accessibility criteria.

Cat Fribley: Exactly. And you can filter by criteria as well, which I think is really helpful. You can choose to search by, for example, state or city, or are there bathrooms at the site? Or you could filter by things like the slope or the grade or signage in Braille.

So, we didn't want somebody to have to read every single one or use their screen reader for every single one, but rather to be able to only show me the sites with what I'm looking for.

Laury Scheidler: Hey, that's wonderful.

Mike Hoenig: Yes, it really is.

Cat Fribley: I am deeply passionate about this map, in part because I really needed it 10 years ago, and it wasn't here when I was desperately looking for it. I would love to tell you, a little bit about my story.

I had a roommate in college whose parents were birders, and therefore she was a birder. And it turns out that relationship was so fortuitous because it was when I was in college that I received my first diagnosis of PTSD. I found birding to be an incredible way to connect with nature, a way for my mind to be calm in a way that didn't happen with traditional kinds of like talk therapies or with other trauma tools that folks had tried to give to me.

And really, in the beginning I don't think I like I said that I would have called myself a birder. But as I got older. The reality of how my brain and my mind my soul change when I am observing birds and when I'm in nature paying

attention to what is around me. It just became so clear to me that one of my biggest coping mechanisms was actually birding.

I'm really lucky I had a first career and now I'm in a second career. And my first career was actually doing anti sexual violence work, and I did that for 30 years, and that work was so incredible to get to do, and it also meant that I relied on birding more than ever in many ways to be able to keep myself as centered and as regulated in my nervous system, as regulated as possible.

Nature is just a really amazing medicine. And so for me, that's how I came to birding. And then I fell down the stairs and I shattered my knee. And I had a pulmonary embolism, and that really changed much about my ability to move in the world both of those things. And because of those, suddenly, it, I couldn't do birding and being in nature in the ways that I always had.

I couldn't just pick up and walk down a trail anymore the way I used to.

I started looking for places where I could access nature for birding, and where the features of the place I was would allow me both to see birds and we're also accessible for me, given my mobility issue and impairment. And so my goodness, do I wish I had the Birdability map during that time, because I would instead do so much research. I would be on Trip Advisor and county park sites and state park sites. And there's no regularity across all of those about how they talk about access. That's why now I think I'm so passionate about the Birdability map and about this work that we're doing is because I'm doing it for myself, too, for myself of 20 years ago, for myself of now, as well as for my community, and hoping that we can really change the world through birding.

Laury Scheidler: I love how you mention not only the physical disability that you were experiencing, but you were also experiencing the PTSD. Don't always think of that as part of disability when it really does affect us in a big way. The way you describe the activity of birding reminds me of mindfulness.

Cat Fribley: A huh. Oh yes!

Laury Scheidler: Can you tell us more about how that experience of using birding helped calm your system?

Cat Fribley: Yeah, absolutely. Again, the one of the things that I find so fascinating is now being in my mid-fifties, I'm able to put words to things from when I was 18, 20, 25, 30 that at the time I could never have articulated, right?

When I would be observing nature around me, and in particular observing birds, I could get so focused on bird behavior, that, my mind just would get quiet and calm just be so present in that moment in a way that I really struggled with other times in my life. That access to the natural world created a different path in my brain.

It wasn't actually until the last five or ten years that I heard anyone talk about mindful birding or slow birding or "Ornithery" which is a fantastic book by a woman named Holly Merker. She wrote about using birding and mindful birding as a way to heal ourselves and to be fully present. But now we're really seeing so much research. There was a recent study that showed birdsong helped to regulate your nervous system. If you listen to birdsong for six minutes, it provided a level of regulation and calming that wasn't able to be replicated with other sounds. That it was really distinct to bird sounds.

We're helping folks understand intense benefits that come with being in the natural world and that a part of that really is creating community. We did an event here in Iowa City just yesterday. It was a celebration of queer pride and then it was also a celebration of disability pride.

One of the things that I love about creating these really intentional invitations to folks is that it's way more than just helping to make a place accessible that's important. It's also helping to make it inclusive.

To say to people, this space includes you. This activity includes you. And that's you as someone with a disability. That's you as someone who is queer. That's you as someone who is black. That is you as someone who is fat. That is you as someone who does not speak English as your primary language. There are so many different folks who have been excluded from this incredible healing who deserve, right, to be able to be a part of it.

Mike Hoenig: Absolutely.

Cat Fribley: Anyone can participate in bird ability by being a contributor to the Birdability map. And as a matter of fact, that would be amazing because the more sites, of course, that are on the map, the more access folks have to the natural world, so we would love it if folks were interested in participating in that way, and it's all available on our website.

Mike Hoenig: For those out there who may just be tuning in for the first time I happen to be blind and I love the sound of birds. So, for those of us that may

have sensory disabilities, would I be able to find resources on learning how to recognize songs?

Cat Fribley: You sure would. Not only that, you might be able to find some community there as well.

One of the things I will tell you is that Birdability has what we call captains, volunteers across the country. They are folks who are deeply invested in creating equity and access to the outdoors for people in their own communities.

And often that includes things like leading accessible and inclusive birding outings. They themselves obviously represent a range of disabilities and identities, and some of the folks that have been most involved with Birdability have been blind birders. And one of the folks I met right away in my work with Birdability, is a man named Jerry Barrier. He lives in Massachusetts and he created a website where he makes recordings of birds.

His entry point to birding was he was taking a biology course in college. He had been blind since birth. And his professor didn't know what to do with him. He said in his labs.

And so he said, 'okay, here's a set of recordings of bird songs. This semester, You're gonna, learn those. We're gonna go for a walk at the end of the semester, and your grade will be on how well you can identify the birds that you're learning from these recordings.' And Jerry talks often about what a gift that ended up being to him. By the end of the semester, he, not only passed, but had a new lifetime passion for listening to birds and his work has been about helping to create access for blind birders.

While this organization started with Virginia and her experience of being a wheelchair user. It has grown, blossomed, and bloomed into an organization that works by and for so many different folks, including, of course, people with mobility challenges, but also blindness, chronic illness, intellectual and developmental disabilities, those who are neurodivergent, deaf, hard of hearing, and others.

It has become clear to us how wrapped up we are in each other's access needs.

Mike Hoenig: Universal design, Yes.

Cat Fribley: Yes!

Mike Hoenig: Unfortunately, we are coming to the end of our time. We always like to close with a question. 50 years from now if people were going to remember Cat Fribley what would you want people to remember about you as an advocate or as a person?

Cat Fribley: I have to say it, I think that my answer has probably changed over the years, but the thing that I most want to leave in the world is community. Is a deep sense of people's connectedness to each other, to ourselves, to nature.

I believe we are relatives and that the more we can recognize our interconnectedness with each other as human beings, and with the earth that sustains us. If that were my legacy, I would be so delighted. I would be just beyond joyful.

Mike Hoenig: That is a wonderful legacy.

Laury Scheidler: Thank you so much, Cat, for sharing with us and our listeners and giving us a broader perspective of birding.

Cat Fribley: Let's be in community with the bird, with each other, with this incredible world around us. We invite you to come and learn about it if you haven't considered yourself as a part of that community.

Mike Hoenig: Wonderful thanks for taking the time to educate us. I know I've learned a ton. I want to especially thank not only you, but Joanna, for her producing and certainly want to thank our audience for tuning into another episode of Disability Exchange, we hope to catch you on podcast land again very soon.

Thank you for joining us today on Disability Exchange. Disability Exchange is produced by the University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities, which is housed at the Center for Disabilities and Development at the University of Iowa. Special thanks to Kyle Delveau for the music contribution.