

Disability Exchange: Season 3, Episode 5

Marking Art More Accessible; Elizabeth Wallace and the UI Stanley Museum of Art

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Judy Warth: Welcome to Disability Exchange. This is a podcast from the University of Iowa Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities.

We are so excited because our purpose is centering and elevating the voices of people with disabilities through meaningful conversation and connections. My name is Judy Warth and I'm a program manager here at the Center for Disabilities and Development. I'm happy to welcome my co-host, Mr. Mike Hoenig.

Mike Hoenig: Thank you, Judy. It's great to, to be back doing. Another episode of Disability Exchange with you, I'm really excited because we have a special guest that I've really gotten to know over the past couple of years through the University Center for Excellence in Disabilities the Council on Disability Awareness and now through her professional Employment at the Stanley Museum, and her name is Elizabeth Wallace.

Elizabeth, first of all, welcome to Disability Exchange.

Elizabeth Wallace: Thank you Mike, and thank you, Judy, for having me. Really was thrilled when Mike asked me to be a guest and feeling somewhat humbled as somebody coming from the arts world, to come and talk with folks in the disability world. I'm pleased to be here.

Judy Warth: Elizabeth, I was so excited when I read about you on LinkedIn. I love your descriptor. I am a Swiss Army knife of course. Skills and experiences, multi purposed, hardworking and intelligently designed and essential. That embodies everything that we talk about here. How do we make things meaningful and functional and changeable to meet the unique needs? it's my understanding that's your superpower. That is one of my superpowers, as advertised on my LinkedIn profile.

Elizabeth Wallace: I was hoping somebody would read it. For all of our fine friends listening, my name is Elizabeth Wallace, and I work at the University of Iowa's Stanley Museum of Art, my role there is manager of visitor experience.

The museum is an academic museum based on the University of Iowa campus. We steward a fine art collection that belongs to the state of Iowa, and therefore the citizens of Iowa.

Anybody can come during opening hours and walk in. There's no fee to enter. the first line of the museum's mission statement is that 'the museum welcomes the University of Iowa community, all Iowans and the world to discover and enjoy extraordinary works of art, explore new ideas, and create new insights into history, culture, and the act of creation.'

When we say everybody, we mean everybody. And how can we facilitate an excellent experience for everybody that honors their individuality, honors their ability that they have autonomy over the experience? What can we provide to them to let anyone who walks in our door have an equitable and meaningful and relevant experience. I'm excited to work at it especially where it intersects the disability community, which is a longstanding personal interest of mine.

Mike Hoenig: That is just really a great intro Elizabeth, now I have more questions than I had before. For those out there in podcast land that may not know I've been blind since birth, so I have experienced my disability in my entire 60 years.

And there continue to be many public venues that say 'we focus on equity.' 'We want art for all, or we want worship for all, or whatever it is for all.' Unfortunately, sometimes disability seems to be just not top of mind or left out altogether, or maybe one disability might be accommodated, but not others.

And I would be very interested in knowing why it is or how it is that you take disability so seriously.

Elizabeth Wallace: It's a great question. I, It's something I've grown into over the course of my life.

I think the important moment for me was when I was a dancer, I danced with, the Washington Ballet in Washington, D. C. and we were free over the summer.

I come from a family of all academic, so it was not a good idea for me to let my mind go fallow. One of the things that I've always found just beautiful to watch is sign language. For me, I feel that it's just like watching dance.

And so I said 'heck Gallaudet University's here. I'll go down there and take some sign language courses.' I did that two summers in a row.

The second summer I was walking back to my car from my class and I heard very loud music. And it was the Gallaudet dance department, which I did not know was a thing or existed. And so naturally the working dancer in me said, 'huh, how does this work? What do they do? How are they learning? How are they performing?' Their director/coach was, hearing. And so I had a conversation with her and I said 'I have the sign language skills of a pre kindergartner at best but gosh, I would love to work with your group. Would you let me volunteer?'

That's how I came to work with them. So I would go in once a week to teach a ballet class. Boy, could they synthesize information and they had a better mind body connection for retaining movement and learning it. It was, how do I connect That movement capability that they have with the sounds that I, as a hearing dancer use to inform the quality of movement.

How could you offer them this kind of education in the way that I understood it? Half of that imagination has to be a change in how we hearing people or speaking people or sighted people have to reframe what we're trying to share and reframe approaches to it. So we have to think outside of the boxes that we know, and then we'll meet our audiences halfway.

Judy Warth: Elizabeth I keep thinking it's, we have to restructure how we see, how we hear,

Elizabeth Wallace: yes

Judy Warth: that we can capture the creativity.

Elizabeth Wallace: Yes

Judy Warth: that is in a different form than we're accustomed to.

Elizabeth Wallace: Yes. But we got significant work done together So I was like, 'Oh, this is really cool.'

That leads me to now, and about four years ago, a colleague of mine left the Stanley Museum of Art, and she was serving on the Council for Disability Awareness, and she said, 'You're the right person to take my seat.' So I did. And that's how I met Mike and the rest is history. That's also been a tremendous learning experience for me because I don't on a daily basis work with the disability community. But it's something that, I felt was relevant to the work I was doing here at the museum

Mike Hoenig: I personally experienced your creativity, and I would call it ‘your genius’ in terms of making things accessible through a touch tour at the Stanley Museum.

Elizabeth Wallace: Yes, I've done a lot of things at the Stanley in my new role to try and improve accessibility and they're mostly have to do with mobility.

Let's make sure everybody can get in and get around. But once we get them to the galleries, there are multiple segments of our potential visitor population that have barriers to access, whether it's linguistic, whether it's psychological. I don't think art museums for me, or I don't think I belong.

We got to the point where I could begin to work on a touch tour, so it's like, ‘how can we make our collections, the works that are on view, accessible to folks who can't otherwise see them with their eyes or have sight limitations?’

The Stanley Museum of Art, was a University of Iowa Museum of Art, and it was founded in 1969. Extensive collections, over 18, 000 pieces in the collection. That's a lot of art that we can't share with some folks, right?

In 2008, the Midwest was hit by catastrophic flooding we got the collections out. But the building was not usable as an art museum anymore it was 14 years before we opened this new building on campus. It just opened in the beginning of the semester of 2022. And during that time, we were very fortunate.

We had a group of donors who were very passionate about arts outreach. And when we had a building, we had brought K through 12 kids in on a regular basis. Every year we would have hordes of K 12 students come through and experience the museum, and we couldn't do that if we didn't have a museum building.

So they invested in what we now call the ‘education collection,’ and it's a group of objects that were purchased to mirror and complement the works that are in the permanent collection of the museum that cannot travel. So when we wound down this traveling education program, we had more than a handful of objects, that were just sitting in storage. A colleague of mine, Joshua Siefken, and I talked about starting a touch tour, repurposing these educational objects, because they're highly touchable.

So we said ‘what would that look like? How would it work? How is that going to work for us on a physical level?’ So we thought it through, we made some choices, and then we brought in Mike. And Mike was very gracious and came

for two hours. He was the first of now we've had three focus groups. We're ready to release this to the public, because with each session and feedback, we've learned how to better facilitate these, how to better present them, what information is valuable, what questions to ask to preface visits, so we can make it as effective for our guests as possible. So I'm going to say, Mike, tell us what you think. Your experience was there.

Mike Hoenig: It was really an awesome experience. Many times I have wanted to have access to things in museums and they've been behind glass or under something or whatever. There are many barriers that people experience about maybe this isn't for me.

And so I, you, when you get the message time and time again it kind of sticks. To have somebody, come and ask me to examine some of those pieces I was really honored and I it was a very much of an interesting experience because it was not just about what they feel like, but there was history and where this came from. I'll never forget is when you presented the first piece and just asking me what, what did it feel like? And what did I think it was? And I was a little ways off. I was explaining that for me, sometimes it was difficult just to manually touch something and necessarily figure out what it was.

Elizabeth Wallace: So the first object that Mike was presented with was a Poro mask from Africa. The education collection leans heavily towards three dimensional objects with a strong representation of objects from Africa, objects from India, and ceramics from the southwestern portions of the United States.

The Poro mask is what we call a helmet mask. It's made out of wood. It fits over the wearer's head in its entirety, like putting on a motorcycle helmet except you're seeing out of little tiny slits. What's important about this object is that it's a compilation of various animals. So there's a crocodile mouth, that has warthog horns, that goes back to a head with long antler horns, that go behind, and then on the crest of the head there's an iguana and a bird. And all of these animals have spiritual and symbolic properties.

Mike Hoenig: If somebody may have had vision previously and had more of that three-dimensional understanding, perhaps a description might be a little bit easier for them to process. But for me, there's no way I could have come close to imagining the properties of the various animals present on the mask.

Just being able to get my own sense of what that felt like was quite powerful and then to know the history. It's a very enriching combination for sure.

Judy Warth: I'm struck as I listened to you guys talk about this, that And I think we find across the board that when we make things more accessible targeting people abled, everyone has greater access.

I want to touch the helmet. I want to feel it because art is. Never, in my opinion, art is never one dimensional. It's got essence. It's got feeling. It's got what what you feel, what you hear, it's got all of that.

Elizabeth Wallace: Frequently accessibility initiatives are add-ons, post facto add-ons. They're things, oh oh, shoot we should make this more accessible. The best practice as we know here in in our community is to hopefully bake things in so it's not an afterthought, Repurposing this education collection. we already know how it could be used for the general public.

So it has built in universal design quality has you built in educational properties and my colleague Josh and I had a long discussion we've got all these other pieces in the collection and we have to find a way to make those equally accessible at an equally high quality level.

Because there's a whole lot of we could like DIY stuff in our basement and say it feels like this, or it's this shape, but we don't want to do that because we don't feel that's an equitable experience.

We're doing everything we can to try and deliver as high quality experience as we can. Those same objects that you experienced, Mike, are now being presented down in the galleries with the addition of a southwestern ceramic but that Poro mask, is always the place that we've started. And it's that much more impactful because, as you said, you were born blind, and we have had a range of Guests in these focus groups, with varying degrees of visual acuity. And in some cases they can see the outline of the object that's on display. Then they're able to have this interaction with a like object on the table. We're getting closer and closer to offering a full hands-on experience,

Mike Hoenig: I would like to ask you to share how, if people are interested in, coming to visit the collection a touch tour or you mentioned some other accessible features what's the best way to, to broker that?

Elizabeth Wallace: Thank you for asking, Mike. The first point of entry that we encourage everybody to follow is our website, which is stanleymuseum.uiowa.edu Under the visit dropdown page there's a page dedicated to accessibility. We hope we address the needs of everyone who's coming. We have a page for folks with hearing or auditory needs. We have a

new initiative for folks with sensory processing. We have linguistic access through iPads. You can check out that have a translation app built into them. The touch tours will be advertised there under visit. And you can always contact the museum directly. I'm excited about the potential for this and I want to encourage your audience not only to check out the touch tours and come and visit the museum but understand that I know this is a partnership with the community that we serve. We hope people will take advantage of this. It's for all Iowans,

Mike Hoenig: I just really appreciate you coming on with us. We'd like to ask just a fun question to wrap up, '50 years down the line what would you want people to remember about your journey, at least to this point, with art and accessibility?'

Elizabeth Wallace: That she believed at the very core of her being that the arts are for everybody, and she did the best she was able to do to make that a reality and walk the walk and not just talk the talk.

Mike Hoenig: I want to give a shout out to Joanna Sabha for her producing. This is a podcast of the University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities at the University of Iowa.

We're grateful for the UCEDD's continuing support. Most of all, I want to thank you, our listeners, if it weren't for you, we wouldn't have a podcast.

Narrator: 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 DeVaux for the music contribution.