Emily Ladau:

Hello, everyone, and welcome to another episode of Disability Inclusion Required. I'm your host Emily Ladau, and today's episode is a really special one for me. We have the entire Disability & Philanthropy Forum team joining me. There are six of us. We are an all disabled powerhouse group of people and we are really committed to supporting the philanthropic sector in the collective journey to disability inclusion. I am incredibly excited to dive into conversation with everyone. We're going to take a look back at the work that we've done, a look ahead at what's to come. But first, I thought we would do some quick introductions from each team member. So you already know me. In addition to hosting this podcast, I am the forum's digital content manager, and I am going to turn it to my fellow colleague, Emily next, and we'll go from there.

Emily Harris:

Thank you. I am the other Emily because Emily Ladau came first. I'm Emily Harris. I'm executive director of the forum. I'm coming to you from Chicago, and I have been with the forum since November of 2019. So that is four years starting as a consultant part-time to the president's office at the Ford Foundation. A brief fun fact is that I grew up on the block in New York where the Macy's Thanksgiving Parade blew up the balloons.

Gail Fuller:

I'm Gail Fuller. I'm the senior director of program and communications. Unofficially, I joined the forum August 2020, officially, September 14, 2020. I have lived in eight states. I'm currently in Florida. My fun fact is that I am a celebrity magnet from presidents to actors to Supreme Court justices. But since it's the holiday season, I'll mention one of my fever people that I had an opportunity to meet and that was Jimmy Stewart on my birthday, June 7, 1991, one of the best conversations I ever had.

Sarah Napoli:

Hi, everyone. My name is Sarah Napoli. I'm calling in today from New Jersey, but I like to say I'm from Manhattan. I'm the learning services director with the forum. Officially started with the forum March of this year, but I've been affiliated with everyone here since 2019, roughly. I love that story from Gail of meeting Jimmy Stewart. My fun fact is that I basically grew up in a record store. My dad co-owned a record store in the 80s. Every day after school I would walk to the store and run around in the aisles and help check out customers. To this day, the smell of vinyl is extremely nostalgic to me, and my dad still has over 5,000 records in the house.

Olivia Williams:

Hi, everyone. I am Olivia Williams. I am the senior program and communications associate for the Disability Philanthropy Forum since March of 2023. I am based in the Midwest. A brief fun fact about me is that I have appeared on television twice and on radio once, and this is my first time on a podcast.

Noor Al-Ahmadi:

Hi, everyone. I'm Noor Al-Ahmadi, the member relations manager calling in from Austin, Texas. I also started with Disability & Philanthropy Forum March of this year. My fun fact is that I share a birthday with my tortoise. So if all goes well, my tortoise will outlive me one day.

Emily Ladau:

So I think it's pretty obvious why I think you're all great and so much fun to work with just from your introductions, but you're reminding me in hearing all of your fun facts that I usually try to get away with not introducing myself too much. But I will join the party in this case, and I will add that I am coming to you from the New York area and also that my fun fact is when I was 10 years old, I appeared on several episodes of Sesame Street. So I think Olivia and I both share the bit about being on TV, which is a lot of fun. We are a team full of really big and bold personalities. To be honest, I could easily have an hours long conversation with each of you individually and we could make separate episodes for everyone. But we're going to make it a little bit more of a roundtable style chat today so that that way everybody has some space to share.

So to get started, I would really love to know what it is that drew you to the work of the Disability & Philanthropy Forum specifically. This time, I will start out and I'll share that for me, it was really essential to have the opportunity to help shape something from the ground up that informs what it is that philanthropy needs to do to become more disability inclusive. It was a conversation that was not being had nearly as much as it should have been, if at all in so many places. So to get in really on the ground floor of the work to shift the narrative in philanthropy towards disability inclusion was something that was very, very exciting for me. Now I'm really curious to hear from all of you. So Gail, let's actually kick it off with you.

Gail Fuller:

Thank you, Emily. I do have to say I was on TV a couple of times too, but we won't talk about those appearances. Oh, gosh, what drew me to this work? It's hard to believe that it took moving into my 50s before I found a passion, and that's the work that I do with all of you with the Disability & Philanthropy Forum. As a Black woman with a non-apparent disability, you guys know the story, for a long time that I just hid in the shadow because I was always fearful if I disclosed my disabilities, one, which can be appearing at times, that I would actually risk my career. I finally had an opportunity to rethink that. For me, part of my role here, it's also bringing the cultural conversation to race and disability. I know from personal experience with my own family talking about disability and race, it's not easy as a Black person.

I feel very strongly that this work that we do, it's important on so many levels. As someone who has spent the majority of their career in philanthropy, to be able to recognize both my gender, my race and my path along my career and to just one job has been really, really important to me. I hope that more people will feel more comfortable with disability, with acknowledging their disability, that foundations will really step forward on what it really means to be disability inclusive. I know this is a short podcast, and I could talk hours on how much and what really drew me to this work, but I'll stop there.

Sarah Napoli:

Thanks, Gail, for sharing that. I think mine is probably similar, but I think that the idea, this is Sarah speaking, sorry, the idea of doing disability work full-time and focusing on something I do well was an incredible prospect. I think too often we aren't given an opportunity to do something that we really excel at and for me, that's training and education. I've been an educator for almost 25 years now, which is pretty wild to say, but primarily on diversity, equity, inclusion work and mostly in higher education and nonprofit organizations.

But the last 10 years have been really laser focused on disability inclusion and justice work. To be given the gift of actually doing that work full-time was such a wonderful idea. It's been almost a year now, about nine months. I can safely say that although it's been an incredibly busy and nonstop ride, but it's just been so rewarding to see that work actually come to life. It's really a dream to be a full-time trainer on disability culture building. I honestly can't believe I get to do this as my job. So that's why I'm excited that I get to do the work. So I'm going to pass it to Olivia.

Olivia Williams:

Thank you, Sarah and Gail. So great to hear both of your stories. I come from a really different perspective because I'm actually just starting out in my career. The forum is actually the first job that I have held since graduating with my bachelor's degree in African and African American Studies in 2022. It was in that final year of my undergraduate studies when I began exploring disability inclusion, disability justice and really taking a deep dive into the frameworks, into the history, into the disparity, the discrimination that people with disabilities have been facing. It was also the time when I realized that I had a personal connection to disability and identity that fell under the disability umbrella.

So I live with two chronic illnesses, and I'm also neurodivergent. I have ADHD and I also live with mental health conditions. Those always felt like very disparate parts of my identity and just things that I tried to not pay attention to and keep to myself. In that process of learning about disability advocacy and disability justice, I realized that those are parts of myself that I could embrace and be proud of, and that is what really led me to actually want to do work around disability inclusion. I wanted to make my new identity and knowledge of these frameworks the center of the work that I do, and so that's why I've been really grateful to do the work that I do with the Disability & Philanthropy Forum.

Noor Al-Ahmadi:

So what drew me to this work is that I found that in all of my activism and community organizing work, disability justice was always at the center of it, especially as someone who's been disabled since childhood. I've been trying to find a way to incorporate disability inclusion into my professional work and life for some time. I feel blessed to have found not only this role, but this amazing team that I get to collaborate with, and I think we're all searching for just a piece of what interests us. I have many professional and personal interests and this is a warm, soft place to land to gather myself and learn more. I think that's really what drew me to this.

Emily Harris:

This is Emily Harris, and it's great listening to all of you and thinking about how so much of what you said resonates with me too. In 2019 when I joined, what was then being a consultant to the Ford Foundation for the President's Council, I had just come off of my first five years in the disability community. Although I had been disabled for 20 years at that time, having lost hearing in one ear when I had a terrible sinus infection right after my son was born, I had never really identified as being disabled. I was incredibly fortunate to be mentored by some of the major leaders in the disability rights movement, Michael Bristow, Judy Heumann, Karen Tamley, Jack Catlin, all from the Chicago area who brought me into leading a celebration around the 25th anniversary of the ADA.

I had this aha moment that this was not only an opportunity to bring my professional talents to a cause, but that this was my cause and that I actually was a member of this community and was so embraced and welcomed and empowered by being part of people welcoming me in and encouraging me to understand what my rights are, just the growth over time to understand how ableism really shapes our world. I think what drew me to the work initially was this sense of urgency. I remember back five years earlier than when I joined in 2014, Michael Bristow had said to the head of the Chicago Community Trust, "What can we do for the 25th anniversary of the ADA to get philanthropy to stop saying we don't fund disability and to engage with this major civil rights issue?"

At the time he said, "Well, let's look more broadly at everybody in the Chicago region." So it felt like when the Ford Foundation, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation were looking for somebody to help organize this work that I was taking on that challenge that had been raised five years earlier and really recognizing that there's so much philanthropy can offer both in terms of funding, but also in setting a tone and creating an agenda for both the nonprofit community. Then with that, with so much influence on policymaking and on how we live, that it really became both a personal and professional passion for me to make change both for increased inclusion of disabled people, but also specifically to see philanthropy turn a corner and take on this mission as its own.

Emily Ladau:

I think, and this is Emily L., what I love most is that we all come to this work with varied life experiences, acquiring disability at different points, recognizing our disability identities at different points. I was born with my physical disability, and I always say that disability is not something that I take off and put on a shelf at night, it's always a part of who I am. So there absolutely is a crossover between the personal and the professional for all of us. I think that is a really powerful thing to be able to be in community with each other and to be able to help foster a sense of community more broadly for philanthropy. So it's very exciting to hear what draws us in and what keeps us going in this work. There is so much that we all do, especially behind the scenes that many of the people who benefit from the work of the forum may not be familiar with.

I want to take a moment to shout that out because we are a small driven team of individuals and we do a lot to keep the forum going. Let's celebrate that, and let's shine a spotlight on the incredible work that's being done. So what is something that you've all done in your time on the forum team so far that you want to tell us more about? For me, it's this project right here, it's the podcast. I love doing the podcast. I love being able to give other people a platform to amplify different perspectives and to have conversations with people because so much of what we do is about conversation and collaborations. So I'm actually going to turn it over to Sarah first to hear what it is that you've done that you'd like to tell us more about.

Sarah Napoli:

Thanks, Emily. I promise I won't talk too long, but it was really hard to choose one thing. I've really been working hard on our 2024 learning strategy, which is going to be launching in January, so super exciting. But that's going to be member training and peer network meetings and self-paced learning for the website and just so much more to come, so I wanted to give you a sneak peek. But in the meantime, what I think I've been most proud of over this past year is just all the virtual and in-person training that I've conducted with foundations and our philanthropy-serving organizations on mostly disability fundamental learning and being able to network with so many different organizations to help them start, continue or cement their disability inclusion journey, which has been challenging but also really fulfilling.

I think for me personally, I just want to shout out for the most exciting and meaningful endeavor over the past year has been CDAP, which is our celebrating disability across philanthropy peer network, which is really for staff across our member organizations that either identify as disabled or work really closely on disability in their work within foundations or also work within disabled communities. As someone who has also been disabled my whole life but hasn't always identified within the community for... because it hasn't always been something that I've been proud of. To go through that journey and discover the community and discover it as something I feel now empowered by and to identify as someone who's proudly disabled to be able to help other folks through that journey in that CDAP space, we meet quarterly and have these network meetings where people have self-identified at these meetings and find that space to really disclose, to build the network, to build that community, to feel really safe to have those conversations and to have really difficult conversations. That has been beautiful. So that's something I've been really proud of.

Olivia Williams:

Yeah, I want to co-sign CDAP is so awesome, and it's been something that's been a really special part of being here with the Disability & Philanthropy Forum. I'll say for me, it's actually something that's coming up literally a couple of days from us recording this podcast. But I had the wonderful opportunity to put together a conference session at the Funding Forward conference by funders for LGBTQ issues this year on disability and trans communities. One of the things that I came to the forum team as holding as a goal was to really highlight disability in the LGBTQA+ community as a member of the community, as a Black woman, and especially highlighting trans experiences.

So for me, it's been a huge joy to propose that session to bring in people, speakers who are just phenomenal, wonderful. We have three disabled trans speakers for that session. It's just been another space where being in conversation with these panelists just preparing this session has been so affirming, and it's been a place of joy amidst really hard times. So that is something that I am going to be very proud of when it's done and when I can say afterward that it went well, but just leading up to it's been something that I have really enjoyed and been grateful for the opportunity to do.

Noor Al-Ahmadi:

This is Noor speaking. So before joining Disability & Philanthropy Forum, I knew next to nothing about philanthropy outside of an observer of philanthropic works in the news. Aside from the work that I do in my role as member relations manager, I feel like I have a better understanding of the inner workings of philanthropy and the gaps when it comes to disability inclusion. I've had the privilege of learning from this team, but also recognizing the players in the philanthropic space that have been behind the scenes of my nearly 10 years of nonprofit work. I know that grant applications are the bane of so many's existence in nonprofit work, but seeing how the sausage is made and how these processes move helps me to understand how the gears of all of this works. I feel like my time here as short as it has been, has definitely influenced how I plan to or how I might move in the future if I decide to ever return to my service-oriented origins.

Emily Harris:

This is Emily Harris. I'm a geek. I'm a strategic planner. I like building new things and trying to figure out how to articulate what it is we're building and what the path is we're going on. That's how I think of a strategic plan. So I think I'm most proud of having worked initially on a theory of change and then in the last year with many of you and a robust strategic planning committee, including both folks from foundations and folks from the disability community to articulate our mission as one that is dismantling ableism by doing three big things. One is building the culture of inclusion and philanthropy. The second is amplifying the leadership of disabled people in philanthropy.

What Sarah was talking about in terms of CDAP goes right there and third, to where this all really rests is to build a culture of inclusion in philanthropy. I'm proud not only of being able to articulate that those are the three places that we are spending our time grantmaking participation of disabled people and building a culture of inclusion, but also being very specific about articulating our values. Those values really rest on the idea that philanthropy has to insist that disabled lives are worth living, that that's really an anti-ableist worldview. That worldview is not the tradition of philanthropy, which was really founded on charity and taking care of those poor people out there.

So to really understand that ableism is a fundamental challenge to the way philanthropy has traditionally operated and to express as our values, the values of the disability justice and rights movement of nothing about us without us and that we need to shift to a social, not a charity or medical model of disability, to do that with a view towards the intersections of disability and every other identity and the intersections of ableism and every other form of systemic oppression. Also, understanding as one of our key values that we understand that we're meeting people in philanthropy where they are, so some of us are ready to embrace a radical disability justice approach. Others are just starting on the journey as I did myself 10 years ago to understand, "Oh, how do I make this event accessible?" So really being able to articulate that and make it our North Star of understanding where we're heading and what the values are that underlie that is probably what I'm the proudest of. But I've loved every single part of what we've done, and I'm so excited about what the next steps hold.

Gail Fuller:

That was wonderful, Emily. This is Gail. Before our team tripled in March of this year, I had the opportunity to juggle so many roles. So I was sitting here thinking what did I want to talk about? I really tried to narrow it down, but then I also thought about how special this conversation is. I have so much respect for each of you guys. You guys are all, all incredible. When it came down to this question I really thought about is actually overseeing our public programs has probably been one of the most fulfilling aspects of the work that I've had an opportunity to be part of. It's allowed me to collaborate with our foundation partners, disability advocates in the team, the wonderful team at the Disability Inclusion Fund.

Our webinars, our public webinars really are focused on shining the spotlight on why a disability lens is essential. I stress essential to addressing key social justice issues from disability and climate change to disability and economic justice to how ableism shows up in philanthropy. We really make it about a conversation that disability advocates have with the foundation president because that is the key audience that we're trying to get to understand why it's key for foundations to use the disability lens in their work. Each webinar engages diverse advocates from across the disability community in conversation about how together we can uniquely move towards a more equitable society for all. If you talk about North Stars, that's really the North Star of our work.

Emily Ladau:

So this is Emily L. here, and I've just been taking this all in. Hey, maybe I'm a little bit biased, but I think I'm allowed to say that we are a team of rock stars, and I want that to be acknowledged and on the record and it's our podcast. So hey, we can do that. I'm so proud of the work that we've done and continued to do, and when we get the chance to reflect on it, what's happened so far and what's coming up, I think that's very, very powerful. We often don't take time, especially in social justice work to honor ourselves and to recognize ourselves for what we have accomplished when it feels like we are sometimes spinning on the hamster wheel.

But I do think that in the few short years that we have been at this work with the forum, we have been making waves, and there's more waves to come. The way that we make waves is by taking action. So here's my favorite question. Every time I welcome a guest on this podcast, I ask them to share with me what it is that they would like for all of our listeners to take away from the episode. So let's leave our listeners with a call to action for philanthropy from each of you and tell me in your own words why is it that philanthropy needs to continue on a path towards disability inclusion, rights and ultimately, disability justice? Olivia, I'd love to hear your call to action.

Olivia Williams:

Thank you, Emily. For me, what is most important about insisting on disability inclusion rights and justice in philanthropy is that every issue is a disability issue. So no matter what focus your philanthropic organization or your efforts have, disability is a component of it because people of all different identities and backgrounds also have disabilities. Whether you're doing gender justice work, if you're doing racial equity work, if you're doing LGBTQA+ justice work, I really want to urge folks to pause and say, "Have we thought about, included and addressed the disabled elements of our work? How have we made efforts to be accessible?

How have we made efforts to have people with disabilities at the table making decisions in this work? How have we made sure that people with disability feel comfortable and welcome in our space, not just from a funding perspective, but just in the perspective of joining the work?" I think there are a lot of different ways that disability enters the conversation, and I just want folks in philanthropy to think about ways that they can incorporate a disability inclusion and eventually a disability justice lens into the work that they do. I think that your work, no matter what it is, it could be more effective when you add in that disability lens.

Noor Al-Ahmadi:

Hi, this is, Noor. I really like what Olivia had to say. I've been thinking about this a lot about how movement work isn't just a single issue, just like how we're not single issue human beings. We care about so many things at the same time, and I understand sometimes it can be hard to focus on more than one thing at a time. There's this quote that I really love from Prentis Hemphill, which is, "We heal so we can act and organize." I believe ultimately, if philanthropy were to focus on the healing aspect of disability inclusion rights and justice, we can stabilize a justice movement for long-term action and organizing. By healing, I mean healing in the workspace by being able and safe to say disability by listening to the communities that their funds serve and recognizing that intersection of disability and every other marginalization that these funders feel so passionately about. I believe that if philanthropy continued on this path toward disability inclusion rights and justice, healing is inevitable and in the same right, so is change.

Emily Harris:

Wow. I don't have anything else to say. You guys are amazing. But I will cite the research we did last year, and I will say just make grants. Just make grants that are going to advance disability rights and justice. Those are the people who are leading the charge on the ground for disability rights and disability justice are significantly underfunded. What we found when we looked at candid data from 2019 was that while 2% of the funding went for disability services and supports, some of which is incredibly important and includes because we use a very broad definition of disability, it includes substance use, it includes supports for people seeking healthcare. It supports all kinds of important services in special education.

But the piece of funding that is so missing, and not to say that 2% is enough since there's 26% of American adults who are disabled, looking at our funding for systemic change that we defined as disability rights and justice, including funding for disability-led organizations that are looking to make that change is 1/10 of 1% of U.S. foundation funding it. It's so minimal that equates to $25 billion a year. That is so tiny in the scale of philanthropic funding that we have so much power to change. If you make one new grant to a disability-led organization, you are changing that percentage dramatically. So I think philanthropy has no place to go but up. While it's important to do all of the learning and all of the culture change, starting to get the money out there is absolutely critical.

Gail Fuller:

This is Gail. I will actually share a story that wasn't maybe two months ago at this point. I was speaking at a conference and as always, I identify myself as a Black woman with a not apparent disability. I had someone at one point ask if I had to choose between racial equity and disability inclusion, which would I choose? I was shocked beyond belief. Then I simply had to say, "As a Black woman with a not apparent disability, the fact that someone would ask me to choose," I said, "part of what I see in philanthropy and in foundations is that it's the same thing I hear when a foundation says, 'I'm working on racial equity and I don't do disability.'"

Well, there is no way to advance racial equity without a disability lens. We see the stats all the time. One in four people in the United States has a disability. I'm one of four when it comes to Black people with a disability. So my call to action is to foundations is let's be real. If you're going to actually advance racial equity, start bringing in people with lived experiences. Those include people with disabilities. If you're talking about housing, if you're talking about climate change, economics, all of those things that are part of advancing racial equity, you're never going to achieve it without bringing in people with disabilities.

Sarah Napoli:

This is Sarah. So I'm the last one here, and everybody has covered just about everything, and it's all absolutely incredible. So I think what I'm going to say is good because I think I'm bringing up all the points you all have said, and maybe it's giving a little more specifics. This team is incredible 'cause I think you've all touched upon all the main points. You all know me so well because you know what I'm going to say, and so this is for the podcast audience here. As an educator, I always like to remind organizations that in order to do the work well, I always say you have to get your house in order because you got to make sure that you train your staff, your leadership, your board on disability fundamentals, culture inclusion, rights and justice. Do your audits, do your access audits on your physical, virtual spaces, policies, grant making practice. Implement proactive ways to consult with the disabled community.

You can do advisory committees, focus groups, participatory inclusive grant making, work on actively recruiting, retaining disabled talent. That's all very important and crucial. But I think more to Gail and Emily's points, and also to Noor and Olivia's points, we need to get dollars out the door. I want to remind philanthropy that ultimately, we need to increase the dollars that are going to disability rights and justice grantees. The movement towards disability justice cannot wait for your organization to develop its strategy on disability inclusion or to train your entire team. We can move the money while we work on our internal policies and strategy changes. This can happen simultaneously because all issues are disability issues, and especially when we're talking about things like climate change and economic justice. These are very timely issues. It's crucial, it's critical. Disabled led organizations that are working on systemic long-term change need the dollars now, and this is the change I really want to see. Thank you.

Emily Ladau:

Wow. Emily L. here, and I was nodding so enthusiastically through all of that that I think I'm going to need to take some ibuprofen afterwards, but well worth it. I also think that we have a very broken microphone because you all dropped it so many times. So I truly could not have said any of that better myself. I think that what I've heard from each of you is that we cannot forget that every issue is a disability issue, and we cannot forget that disability overlaps with all other identities. If we forget that, then how are we going to do the work of healing our world and bringing our movements together? But we can't do that if we don't just make grants, as you said, and get the dollars out the door, as you said. So I think that you all beautifully wove together a powerful call to action with a lot to think about, a lot of food for thought, and some really tangible and actionable advice.

So I couldn't be more thrilled that I got to spend time interviewing all of you today. I can't wait to share this with our audience of podcast listeners. I know that getting that behind-the-scenes look and getting to know you all will be as enjoyable for them as it was for me, and I already have the privilege of knowing all of you. I just want to say that anyone who is listening, who has been motivated to keep your learning journey going, you can visit the Disability & Philanthropy Forum at disabilityphilanthropy.org. There are so many resources on there for you to take a look at. For now, I am Emily Ladau and this has been another episode of Disability Inclusion Required. Thank you so much for tuning in, and join us again next time. Bye.