

EMILY LADAU:

Hello everyone and welcome to another episode of Disability Inclusion: Required. I'm your host, Emily Ladau, and I am so excited that today I am joined by two really dynamic disability advocates, Dom Kelly and Jalyn Radzinski, who are paving the way in the realm of civic engagement for the disability community.

And you're both doing really vital work to empower disabled people to take our rightful place in the political sphere. And you're encouraging a shift in culture and in conversation. And both of the organizations that you're part of are grantees of Borealis Philanthropies Disability Inclusion Fund. And that fund exists to seed and expand the capacity of the disability justice movement. And it's also amplifying powerful grassroots leaders who are at the forefront of policy advocacy, community organizing, and also narrative change work, all of which go together. So I already know, and it should be well established by now that both of you are absolute rock stars. But before we dive in, I would really love if both of you could take a minute to just share some more about yourself and what you do so our audience can become familiar. So Jalyn, I'll turn it over to you first and then Dom, you can follow up.

JALYN RADZIMINSKI:

Thank you so much Emily. And hi everyone, this is Jalyn Radzinski speaking, and I just wanted to say thank you so much again to Borealis this disability inclusion podcast. And Emily, just for having me. Really excited for this conversation and a quick image description. I'm a black and Japanese person with brown curly hair and I'm the founder and CEO of Count US IN. We also are known as Countess, Indiana and Count US IN were the first nonpartisan nonprofit led by black indigenous people of color in the disability community. And we educate, empower, and show the community that our voices matter through voting and other means of integrated civic engagement, which I hope I can talk about a little bit more later.

And I also work as the director of engagement at the Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law and attend Fordham Law School as an evening law student. And basically all of my work centers around the intersection of racial and disability justice and civic engagement. And it's really informed by my lived experience with mental health and physical disabilities. I've navigated voter suppression myself, which also encouraged me to get into this work and just over nine years of experience doing advocacy to stop mass incarceration and institutionalization of our disability community. But that's being short and I'm excited to jump in soon.

DOM KELLY:

Well, I'll take it from my friend Jalyn, who is definitely a rockstar and I appreciate, Emily, you calling us rock stars. I am Dom Kelly. I use See your pronouns, my visual description. I'm a white man with brown curly hair and some brown facial hair on my face. I'm the co-founder, president, and CEO of New Disabled South, which is a 501(c)(3) and our 501(c)(4) are New Disabled South Rising. We're the first and only regional disability organization in the United States, so we're focusing on the south as a region.

Our work is focused on policy advocacy, grassroots community organizing, research and coalition building, all of which I believe are critical to increasing the political power of disabled folks. That's one of the ways that we talk about our organizations is that we're creating a progressive political home for disabled people in the south because our people down here are disenfranchised more than probably elsewhere in this country, especially if you're a black or brown disabled person. And so we are building that political power here in a region where folks in our community, are really hurting and face the disproportionate impact of policy choices at the state and local level in particular. So that's a little bit about what we're fighting for and I'm excited to dig into this conversation. A topic that I just love to talk about.

EMILY LADAU:

It brings me so much excitement to hear what both of you are up to because this is a conversation we need to be having. We need to be talking about civic engagement. We need to be talking about how we can prevent voter disenfranchisement. This is something that I'm incredibly passionate about. That being said, I think that very often when we get into these conversations, we can get a little bit ahead of ourselves. So it would be helpful if we backed up a little bit and we try to get some grounding for this discussion. The fact, and we know this, is that disabled people, especially those who are multi marginalized, are very consistently subjected to voter disenfranchisement. And before we dive into the solutions, let's talk about why this is a problem, why is this the case? And then also I'd love if you could share some specific examples of how disabled people are being pushed away from exercising their right to vote, especially in the states that your organizations are representing. So Dom, I'm going to come back to you and then Jalyn, you can follow up.

DOM KELLY:

Absolutely. So I can talk really about the south and we all sort of know the history of this region, of our country as it relates specifically to black folks and how we still have the stained legacy of slavery in this country. And in particular the south. And after enslaved people were freed, they went into a world that was segregated, a society that was segregated here in the South. And part of that meant that they didn't have the right to vote. And so we went through Jim Crow. I think coupled with that was the eugenics movement and ugly laws in this country that really can further marginalized disabled folks who were already institutionalized. And so both of those things combined have left a lasting in imprint on this region. I think about a story that I talk about often. My wife's grandmother, she's a black woman, she just turned 86 on Sunday and she was born into a sharecropping family, born into segregation in the south, gained her right to vote on August 6th, 1965, the day the Voting Rights Act was passed on her 28th birthday.

And the very first election that she was not able to vote in was June of 2020 at the height of the pandemic in the Georgia Democratic primary. And that was because of voter suppression. It was because she as a disabled woman, as a black disabled woman, was not able to physically go to the polls at the height of a pandemic as an immunocompromised person. And because of both mismanagement... I have heard others say that voter suppression can be both incompetence and malfeasance. And in this case, voter suppression was probably both that

day, but in her case it was incompetence and she did not receive her absentee ballot and was not able to vote in that election. And their suggestion to her was that she should just vote in person and she couldn't safely. And so that was one of the first, if not the first election, she was not able to vote in since she gained her right to vote.

And that is just one example of how folks who are disabled, especially if you're multiply marginalized, are pushed out of the system. They will close polling places and say that it's because they're not accessible, but there's never a plan to make the polling places more accessible. Here in Georgia, we just criminalized the ability for elections offices to take private funds like grants. And most of the private funds and grants that they have taken have gone to improve polling places accessibility. So now not only is it banned, it's criminalized if you take it. And these polling places are underfunded. So that's going to impact disabled people. And there's myriad examples of anti-voting laws that have been passed since 2020 and ways that we have been pushed out of the system. But it is because of this legacy of Jim Crow, this legacy of eugenics in this part of our country. And really it threatens the non-disabled white majority male power in this country. And so whether it's malfeasance or incompetence, it is a way to push aside the folks who are marginalized.

EMILY LADAU:

Dom, thank you for situating us both in the historical context of this, but also reminding us that history has a tendency to repeat itself and is doing so right now. And that there is definitely, definitely action that we can take to shift that, which we'll talk about in a moment. But Jalyn, I'm wondering if you could talk to us a little bit about how some of this plays out in Indiana.

JALYN RADZIMINSKI:

Absolutely. And also super grateful for what Dom shared. So to expand a little bit also on why I got into this work is because I've personally experienced voter suppression and I really like Dom's emphasis on malfeasance. And I would add just basic oppressive systemic structures can also prevent our community from having basically our right to vote. So for example, I actually lived in Georgia for a while when I was a college student and I was still a voter in Indiana, like many typical college students.

And just for an example of how some errors can really impact the disability community, especially BIPOC disability community members is, one year, the absentee ballot application, when it was mailed out, it had to be re-mailed out three times by my county because it was misprinted. And there was a lot of stories on the local news that said even if I were to fill out that paperwork in a timely manner and turn it in on time, it wouldn't matter because it was misprinted. So because the absentee ballot applications were misprinted and mis-uploaded so many times, I didn't have the opportunity to vote in that election. So that was my sophomore year in college. My junior year in college. I just kind of wanted to emphasize the importance of why we need to think more broadly about civic engagement in different ways and how different carceral and institutional structures can impede the vote.

So I think it's pretty well known that people impacted by incarceration have barriers to voting. But I would also add to that larger conversation institutionalization. So unfortunately because I had a mental health crisis due to my disability when I was a junior in undergrad. Because I was in institution, I was completely blocked away from society. I was completely blocked from having access, and it was right before the voter registration to vote absentee. So I missed that cycle as well because... And many people with disability community and mental health community who have experienced involuntarily being institutionalized based off of how people perceive you and your mental health, it can shut off a lot of things in addition to voting, like basic access to housing, access to your job, access to education. So I just kind of always like to bring in that more narrowed in scope of things and how institutionalization also plays an impact.

And then finally, just another example, malfeasance as an absentee voter, just to kind of paint a picture there first because that's a common way people with disabilities are disenfranchised, is my senior year I was trying to vote, but I figured out how to turn in the absentee ballot online to vote absentee by mail, and my ballot didn't get to me in time. After following up with email multiple times, I followed up, I actually applied for it over a month early to try to be ahead of the curve, but unfortunately I didn't receive my ballot. So this is three election cycles that I ended up missing and I really wanted to do something about it. So I really got involved and I did a political fellowship locally with Fair Fight Action in Georgia, and I interned with the American Association of People with Disabilities Fannie Lou Hamer program to really figure out how can I learn how to bring the disability and Black, BIPOC perspective to voting rights because those were my personal experiences.

And I will say even my friends and family on the ground in Indiana experienced voter suppression themselves due to racial profiling due to a lot of ads or a lot of voting locations being shut down earlier than they were stated. A lot of locations being shut down early in the pandemic or consolidated. There's just so many different issues. And that's just my personal experience without even diving too far into how misinformation can also impact the disability vote. So for example, often, I know Dom talks about how that in Georgia they passed some legislation where people aren't allowed to give out food and water in lines. Indiana you can, but because that is a national conversation, groups like mine often get criminalized for doing so even in places where it's legal. So I just kind of wanted to share that as well. In addition to just everyday things, everyday systems that impact us, even how other states are impacted and misinformation can really impact our ability to vote.

EMILY LADAU:

This conversation is so multi-layered and I recognize that people who are already taking the time out to listen to this conversation are very likely already interested in finding ways to invest in doing this work. But that being said, I know that a lot of people can be at a different point in learning about disability in general and learning about how disabled people are so often shut out of civic engagement. And so even those who are most well-meaning when it comes to being disability inclusive could definitely use a little bit of guidance to make sure that they're not unintentionally being exclusionary. So we've laid out some context for what the issues are and what the barriers are.

Now, Jalyn, what would you say to people who are leading this work of voter engagement and civic engagement more broadly who might not have even considered why it's so important to include the disability community within these initiatives? Why is it essential to this work and ultimately why, if I may be so bold, would it make things better for everyone?

JALYN RADZIMINSKI:

That's such a great question, Emily. And honestly, I don't know, people say bold radical, but I do think that should be a saying in the everyday household that disability inclusion really helps everyone. So I would say people who are doing this work and voting in civic engagement that don't yet consider the disability community as an importance in their initiatives, I would say it's very much time to get to work as soon as possible because without including disability, you're leaving out an intersection of people that are at least a quarter of the population. And it's important to get to that work immediately because we don't want so many millions of people to be left behind. And it's important because like you said, Emily, it really impacts the entire community.

And kind of like what Audre Lorde said, that we as people don't live single issue lives. And I feel like people have to consider disability in every voting initiative, every civic engagement initiative, even just when people civically engage every policy initiative because you can't talk about civic engagement without talking about disability because there's so many civic engagement barriers and voting barriers that need to be directly addressed by disability inclusion. And we can't talk about inclusion of people of different races, genders, or orientations without talking about disability because we need to unpack those intersections as well to be truly inclusive of even those populations. Because such a large percentage of the disability community does identify as LGBT or in the BIPOC community. So I guess my quick answer, but I'm sure we're going to continue to unpack this more, and I know Dom will have a lot to add.

DOM KELLY:

Yeah, I actually don't have a lot to add Jalyn, you hit the nail on the head. I think I'll just share personally that when I actually also worked at Fair Fight Action, Jalyn and I think overlapped a little bit. We didn't meet there actually, interestingly enough, but I, on my first day asked our voter protection team what they were doing around disability and disabled voters, and they didn't have an answer. Granted, it was a very, very brand new organization, so understandably they were still building out the scope of their work in general. But I think it was a question that is so important for us to ask folks in this space because as Jalyn said, we're a huge part of this population and we are a big voting block. And while I think the stats show that we're pretty much half-and-half politically in terms of party, that doesn't matter, we're pushed out of the system equally regardless of party.

And so if organizations are honestly doing the work to expand civic engagement and educate voters, they have to include disabled voters, they have to ensure that their materials are accessible. They should be thinking about how to build a field program that reaches disabled voters in places and in ways that are not typically thought about. In my previous, before I launched NDS officially, I worked on Stacey Abrams campaign for governor of Georgia as her

senior advisor for disability, and I built a disability engagement program that brought us to places where people candidates didn't go, where organizations didn't go to reach voters, brought them to members of the IDD community who had never met a candidate before, who had never been touched by a canvasser or had never been touched by someone out there getting people registered to vote organizations, people who are doing this work need to think about where our voters are and think creatively and strategically about where to reach us, and how to reach us.

EMILY LADAU:

So that is actually a perfect segue into my next question. You are both very experienced in this work, but I think a lot of people who are excited about the prospect of being more disability inclusive about expanding their reach or saying, "Okay, what actions can I take?" And I really like to leave people who are listening with some actionable ideas. So Dom, just based on your wealth of experience, if a foundation or an organization is just beginning to think about this kind of work and how they can incorporate disability into civic and political engagement efforts, can you share some ideas about first steps that you think that they can take to meaningfully start that process of this culture shift?

DOM KELLY:

Yeah, absolutely. I think the very first step is, talk to disabled people. We are the experts in our lived experience. And also I think within that, it's critical to talk to the most marginalized among us. So I always appreciate a good conversation about this and I'm always happy to do that. But I am a white, disabled cis dude. I face barriers to voting, yes, but I don't face the same barriers that folks in our community who are multiply, marginalized face. So find those folks who are at those intersections and talk to them about where are the gaps?

Why aren't they voting? Are they voting? What are the barriers that have been put in front of them? Find experts like Jalyn in this space and to ask questions and talk to us, bring us to the table because as we say, "Nothing about us without us." And you can't build a disability inclusive program without disabled people at the table. So I think that would be just my... There's some other, I think really great things that folks can be doing that are specific, but I'd say broadly the very first thing is just bring us to the table.

EMILY LADAU:

And that is a big first thing. So I'm right there with you. Without disabled people as part of the conversation, there simply is no way to actually be having this conversation. And Jalyn, would you add anything to that?

JALYN RADZIMINSKI:

I feel like Dom and I are always on the same wavelength, so I'm actually sitting here smiling. But yes, just to kind of forward Dom's point, I feel like this was almost done on purpose or something. So just to build off of what Dom said. Yeah, just kind of from the foundational and

organizational sense, just really uplifting that point about nothing about us without us and making sure we're at the table, but also if it's a foundation or a philanthropy, just supporting disability organizations led for and by us that already exist. Because I think- well, far too often I see well-meaning funders or well-meaning organizations that are looking for collaborators that are just starting to think about including disability in their work.

If you're just getting started and you don't have the expertise yet, if you don't have the leadership yet, there's already organizations out here, many funded by Borealis like Dom and myself, but there's so many amazing organizations and leaders out here that are already doing this work, and we just simply need more resources to sustain this important work led for and by us that we need. So I would say I always like to emphasize collaboration as a start too, and just supporting those of us who have been in the trenches for a long time. And I would just say for organizations, whether you're a foundation of philanthropy, a nonprofit, anything just like democracy, it should always start from the inside. It would be very hard to go out and preach democracy, let alone disability inclusion. If you don't have that inclusion within your own home, right, within your own family, within your own community, is your leadership embodying those values or at least trying to unpack implicit bias surrounding those issues.

And if you start from the inside, you'll start to see that it'll benefit your organization for taking that important step to figure out how to be more inclusive of disability and let alone its intersection with democracy. So that's kind of a big thing I would say. And the other thing I would say is just again, emphasizing collaboration, convene with organizations and different expertise and focus areas like if you're a disability organization, collaborating more with organizations that focus on civil rights and racial justice, collaborations across regions and states. I can say if you're just getting started in disability issues, it's really neat to see conversations like what Dom and I are having. For instance, there's Georgia policies that passed or were pending that are really harmful that even though Indiana isn't in the south gets proposed here or vice versa. There's a lot of harmful voter ID laws that came out of Indiana that went on and were also proposed and passed in Florida.

So just really choosing to start that collaboration, really choosing to work with and uplift groups and people who are doing it, I think are a great step in starting that journey.

Emily Ladau

I think that is such a powerful call to action. And I think that really focusing in on that idea of collaboration is so essential. And Dom, I'm wondering if you also have a call to action for philanthropy. What is it really that needs to happen across the philanthropic sector right now so that we can actually move in the right direction towards being meaningfully disability inclusive throughout our civic engagement work?

DOM KELLY:

Yeah. I think this pertains to civic engagement and also just broadly, it's very frustrating sometimes to approach a funder and to hear, "Wow, this work is incredible, but disability is outside of our focus," when they fund civic engagement and democracy and they fund environmental justice and repro justice and racial justice. And this is the work of our organizations, these are the intersections with disability. And I think it's really critical for those in philanthropy to remember that there is no social justice issue that is not a disability justice issue. They go hand in hand, especially when we talk about civic engagement and expanding the right to vote and building a truly representative democracy. Disabled people have to be a part of that.

We have to be a part of these conversations about how we tear down voter suppression, because disabled people, especially disabled people of color, are the most targeted for voter suppression. We have to talk about training people to run for office. And when we have those conversations disabled people have to be included. We have to talk about the structural and systemic barriers that are in place for disabled people who want to run for office. Because if you receive benefits, you oftentimes can't.

We have to talk about when we're educating voters on issues that impact their lives, we have to talk about disability issues and we have to talk about them in a way that is in plain language and easy to understand because that's a disability justice issue. So I would encourage the philanthropic sector to stop thinking narrowly about disability, to be more open to thinking about disability and how it intersects with every other issue area. Every single issue that you fund and are interested in, disability is a part of that, and that disabled people live at all of those intersections, and you cannot have a truly inclusive society without disabled people. And if that's the goal in philanthropy, especially progressive philanthropy, then disabled people have to be a part of it.

EMILY LADAU:

I think that is such a valuable insight to wrap up on, and I really hope that the foundations and the organizations who are out there listening to this will heed what both of you have shared. But there is so much more work to be done, and you are both deep in that work. And so I'm so grateful that you took the time to join me for this conversation, but I'm also wondering how people can continue to follow the work that you're doing. So Dom, where can people find your organization on social media?

DOM KELLY:

Sure, you can go to newdisabledsouth.org. You can find us on Twitter at DisabledSouth, and then Instagram, Facebook at NewDisabledSouth. We're also on LinkedIn. I think that's all the platforms we're on. Maybe Threads. I can't really keep up to be honest with all the platforms. But yeah, you can follow our work on there. We've got some stuff on YouTube. Just Google us and you'll find out everything you need to know.

EMILY LADAU:

And Jalyn, what about you?

JALYN RADZIMINSKI:

Yeah So you can check us out at countusindiana.org and on social media similar to Dom and New Disabled South. We're on LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter or X, whatever you like to call it these days. And our tag is @CountUSIndiana, and hopefully we'll be on Thread and TikTok soon as well. But we are on those platforms. Yeah, we'll be having some exciting announcements for our racial justice and accessibility fellows soon, so please check us out. We're excited to gear up for 2024.

EMILY LADAU:

I am so excited by the work that both of you're doing. Dom and Jalyn, you are fantastic. I'm so grateful that you were able to take the time out today, and I want to encourage everyone to keep their learning journey going by checking out disabilityphilanthropy.org for more information and resources. But for now, this has been another episode of Disability Inclusion Required. Thanks so much for listening, and we will catch you next time.