

Justice Shorter:

Greetings, everyone, and welcome back to Disability Inclusion Required. I'm your host, Justice Shorter. It is November and the most recent election cycle is now behind us but a future that consists of better disability representation and engagement throughout all aspects of the democratic process, well, that's still ahead of us and we all have much to do if we endeavor to meaningfully change our systems of governance in ways that include and invigorate people with disabilities. Sarah Blahovec joins us today in conversation to discuss the importance of issues at the intersection of disability and democracy. Sarah is the co-founder, co-director and president of Disability Victory, a 501(c)(4) organization that launched in 2023 to build the political power of disabled progressives through trainings, networking and leadership development. Let's get into it. Welcome, welcome, welcome, Sarah. How are you?

Sarah Blahovec:

I am good. How are you?

Justice Shorter:

I am doing the best I can on this day, in this moment, during this time.

Sarah Blahovec:

Yeah, I definitely feel that.

Justice Shorter:

I am so happy that you are here though, it is definitely timely to have your thoughts and your perspective be shared widely throughout our network on this particular topic of disability and democracy. So, I introduced you as one of the mighty forces behind Disability Victory but can you introduce yourself for our audience by way of this question? What would you define as your most victorious moment? How did it help to shape you into the person you are now?

Sarah Blahovec:

I've been thinking about that question for a little while now and I can't say there's really one moment, it's all little victories. I've been working in disability civic engagement for about a decade now through multiple different roles. I was at the National Council on Independent Living for a while, I worked at the DNC in 2020, I now work as a civic engagement expert as well as run Disability Victory with Neal Carter, our co-founder, and it's just a lot of little things that have led here. I would say, of course, two of those victories were starting Elevate which was the precursor to Disability Victory. It's something that, back in 2018, we started talking about there were no campaign training programs focusing on people with disabilities and we are hearing from a lot of people with disabilities that they were not being included in campaign training programs. So, being able to launch that as the first campaign training program focusing on disabled leadership to get disabled people to run for elected office and to work on campaigns was certainly a victory.

And then we decided to branch out and create our own 501(c)(4) in 2023 and I'd say that was also a victory. It's certainly been an uphill battle to be able to find the funding to support a disability 501(c)(4) and one that's focused on campaign training. So, there have been just little things along the way like being able to launch our first accessible workshops, we being able to launch our resources that we have on our site that really, I think, have gotten us to this point, yeah.

Justice Shorter:

So, Disability Victory is essentially the evolution of Elevate in its next iteration. You spoke about enhancing civic engagement, so much of your work focuses on disability and democracy more specifically getting people with disabilities involved with all aspects of the democratic process. But how can funders help enhance civic engagement throughout the disability community both within and outside our current systems of governance?

Sarah Blahovec:

There's a lot of work that needs to be done on the part of funders to support the programs that are out there that are trying to grow. That includes funders in the C3 space, in the C4 space. I would say, whenever I started nearly a decade ago, something I heard a lot from C3 funders because I was at Nickel which is a 501(c)(3) organization, was that disability wasn't in the portfolios of these large funders that focused on civic engagement. And there's been a lot of changes since then due to the work of folks like Rebecca Cokley at the Ford Foundation, people who have been trying to push funders to include this. There's a lot of work that needs to be done and more political funding as well on that because there's certainly a lot of times we hear disability isn't in their portfolio or why can't you incorporate with another campaign training program that isn't focused on disability.

And it's something we came in in 2023 as a new 501(c)(4), that was a very big year in terms of challenges for fundraising for more progressive movements and more political side C4 pack fundraising. Lots of layoffs in organizations like ActBlue and Run for Something, that's something that's continued into this year where we did see record fundraising for some political campaigns but that did not translate to movement work in both nonpartisan voter mobilization and more progressive mobilization where C3 and C4 organizations that are focused on marginalized communities did not have the funding to get out there and talk to voters about issues that were on the ballot.

So, we really need to see the sustained effort from funders to fund movement work and not just political campaigns. Political campaign funding is of course important and we see these record amounts of money being spent, especially at the federal level, but we need to see the work being done on the ground being funded, the mobilization of communities, and that includes stuff like civic funding but that also includes the work being done by grassroots organizations that are not necessarily focused on things like getting out to vote or training leaders. We need to see more funding for mutual aid groups which doesn't necessarily fall, sometimes they fall under a C3 label but sometimes they're just community organizations because we're going to see a lot of hardship coming.

We have been seeing hardship for the past several years with the COVID pandemic and the changes in rolling back pandemic programming that kicked millions of people off of Medicaid, things like that. We're seeing these challenges where people just need the funding to survive and so we need funders to be investing in community-level organizing whether that is civic participation, whether that's just things like survival funds or disaster relief, things like that.

Justice Shorter:

Mm-hmm, such an inequitable distribution of funds and seeing it on every level. People are seeing that in terms of what you mentioned, by way of political campaigns and people are asking, "Where's the money going?" There's billions of dollars going into all of these donations and continuous persistent ask for donations and folks says where is that going. And for folks who need the money on the ground to literally get out to vote but not just to vote, as you mentioned, but also to do some of that essential long-form sustained community organizing work, not just to come around every four years when we need you to participate in the general election.

You mentioned hardships, the hardships that people are currently facing as well as the hardships that we can expect to face as the disability community over the next several years. I want to talk to you a little bit more about that. I want to spend some time on the very real fears, frustrations and fatigue many disabled

folks currently have around politics and their corresponding consequences. You are intricately involved with disability-centered community engagement so what are disabled folks sharing with you about specific challenges to your disability rights and/or some of the proposed changes that actually do promise to erode much of the progressive policies that have been achieved over the past few decades even?

Sarah Blahovec:

Yeah, I think there's a lot going on and it's not limited to just the changes that have happened in this election. We've seen with the COVID pandemic, again, the pandemic protections have been rolled back, the community care, the amount of communal efforts towards public health have really been eroded as well as look at the, I don't want to say unprecedented, but escalating changes in the climate. Climate emergency where communities have been absolutely destroyed from hurricanes and flooding and disabled people and groups like New Disabled South have gone towards trying to provide that mutual aid funding as a 501(c)(3) and had hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of requests.

So, there's already issues that are here that are escalating where people are not getting the support and access they need and these organizations are trying to fill in gaps that are left by a crumbling social safety net where there's not the support that's needed to fund disaster relief, to fund healthcare, to fund our crumbling infrastructure and educational system. And we're going to see, unfortunately, I think we're going to see a lot of the battles that we fought in 2016 to 2020 around the Affordable Care Act and Medicaid where disabled people were on the front lines. We were fighting the attempts to repeal without really replacing the Affordable Care Act and Medicaid where we're seeing discussions about cutting Medicaid, I'm sure we'll see discussions of block granting Medicaid again. So, we're going to have to deal with those.

Attacks on the Americans with Disabilities Act, again, something that was not limited to just happening in 2016 to 2020, of course, we saw attempts at the national level to pass bipartisan legislation to roll back the Americans with Disabilities Act but we also are seeing potential court cases around it. There was one in the last session, the Atchison Hotels versus Laufer case that ended up being thrown out as moot but I think we'll probably see continued attempts in the courts to limit the already fairly limited Americans with Disabilities Act instead of expanding upon it. There's certainly concerns about what happens if the Department of Education is dismantled because that handles a lot of special education and also a lot of guidance for just helping marginalized students in general, queer and trans students, students with disabilities, Black and indigenous and people of color.

So, I think there's a lot of concern about the further erosion of our national institutions and the already eroded safety net that we have and what is it going to look like if these changes are put into place.

Justice Shorter:

What would it look like if funders intervened? What could they do to intervene in this moment?

Sarah Blahovec:

It's challenging because we're up against billions of dollars from special interests, from corporations that are trying to erode labor protections and trying to make these changes. And so, we really need to see funding at the community level, we need to see funding for movement work and organizers at the community level as I said. I think a lot of organizations that were mobilizing in 2024 to get out to voters, particularly, I saw a lot of discussion from organizations that try to work with communities of color that they did not have the adequate funds that they needed to get out to their communities and to be able to mobilize to vote. I think we're going to need funding at all levels, national organizations, state level and local level that are all doing this work both in terms of voter mobilization, on policy advocacy to support different communities.

All of these communities intersect marginalized groups that are concerned about their rights being eroded but we need to see sustained involvement. It felt like, in 2023, it was pulling back a little bit from funders. There were, at least in the political sector, there were of course really good initiatives in the C3 side, one of them that I saw was called All by April which was encouraging democracy funders, 501(c)(3)s to get money into the hands of nonpartisan organizations that are doing voter registration and education and mobilization by April instead of waiting until way later in the election.

But we need to see sustained work from funders to identify these local, state and federal groups and to provide consistent funding that they are able to do this work.

Justice Shorter:

Let's go even deeper on the local lens. I want to turn towards access to information and literacy. Now, you and I share a deep love of public libraries, many of which are facing significant funding cuts and legal threats in connection to book bans and censorship. Can you talk to us a bit about the vital role public libraries play in advancing access to information for people with disabilities?

Sarah Blahovec:

Yes. I love libraries, it's one of the five things I can't live without is a public library. And actually, I believe I saw polling recently that said that libraries are one of the government institutions that people generally still have a lot of trust for despite the fact that there are these discussions of politicizing libraries and talking about book band, cutting library funding. Libraries are one of the most essential services in our communities and they're also one of the most overworked, at least in my area. I live in Alexandria, Virginia, we have a very robust library system and it provides a lot more than just access to books and movies. It has classes including English language classes, it has community groups, it provides early childhood services and educational services. It's really doing so many things and I've read online a lot of librarians talk about, in many ways, they're so overstretched trying to provide all these services and be this community center for people.

And we're seeing discussions of censoring books and cutting access to libraries both public libraries and access in schools. And so, it's a very important resource especially for lower income folks. I know a lot of people go to libraries to get access to internet services, get access to the books that they want to access and so I'm very concerned about that but I'm very glad that there are organizations out there like EveryLibrary which is a 501(c)(4) that is working to support legislation. It's a nonpartisan organization that is working to support legislation to protect libraries from censorship and book bans and to increase access to library funding. So, I would love to see funders continue to support organizations like that, support the library foundations themselves and to get involved in this fight to protect libraries.

My library is wonderful, actually, living in the DC area, I benefit from reciprocity as well so I have library cards at a bunch of different libraries around the area because, as a resident of Alexandria, I have access to about nine other systems. And so, I am a frequent user of a library and I can say that the librarians there are incredible. I'll see, every July, they'll do a curated selection on disability pride and they'll put that information up front. And so, I'll go in here and I'll see Alice Wong's books and other folks that are really just fantastic representatives of the disability community.

Justice Shorter:

Mm-hmm. And as you mentioned, not even just the access to books and movies and spaces to learn more, it also, quite literally, provides access to equipment. There's so many pieces of accessible technology that becomes available in public libraries that people become exposed to, they receive training on, we have accessible materials for the blind and people who have low literacy and people who need alternative formats to access their material and a lot of that is made available at these public libraries. I'm so happy that you mentioned the foundations, the library foundations because what people also seldom do not take

into consideration is that so many wonderful events and author talks and public engagement type of activities are taking place and are being funded through those foundations because the library themselves, through their yearly or annual budgets, do not have the funds to do it.

Sarah Blahovec:

Yeah. And it's something that the ... Our library in our area, it has programs, it even gives out, rents out American Girl dolls to girls who can't. That was a status symbol in the '90s, whenever I was growing up, was getting an American Girl doll. So, having access to those educational programs, it's really just, it's an amazing service. You can get audiobooks, I don't know if you've ever looked at an Audible subscription or you have one, they're very expensive. So, being able to get audiobooks from the library is a lot more cost-effective especially whenever you have programs like reciprocity where ... My library only has access to, on average, 7,000 available books at a time and nearby libraries have about 21,000. So, those services are amazing as well.

Justice Shorter:

So, we went local and now I want to go global. Although, in the US, disability rights are tethered to state and federal laws, disability solidarity, it's not bound by borders. Tell us more about how people with disabilities are organizing across the globe to amplify each other's voices and to advocate for the safety, dignity and belonging of those in crisis conditions. Many such conditions, might I add, have been attributed to governing systems that repeatedly deprioritize and endanger disabled lives.

Sarah Blahovec:

Yeah, yeah. Our freedom, our liberation is all interconnected and that's something that we learned from disability justice. And so, we have to recognize that there's a lot of work to be done in terms of international solidarity with the disability community, especially the global south. One thing that we've seen a lot of connection to recently is disability justice in Palestine which I know is considered a controversial topic but, regardless of where people stand on this, it is clear that people who are in ... Disabled people who are in Gaza and in the West Bank do not have the same access to being able to evacuate in these situations where bombs are falling. They have repeatedly spoken about this. The goal use authorization has meant that there has been a blockade on access to assistive technology, assistive devices and so they are not able to get the same access to medication there, something that's been really bad as hospitals have been repeatedly bombed.

And so, there's a lot of solidarity and understanding of our rights are intertwined and we are living in a country that is really funding this aggression at this point. And so, disabled people in the United States recognize that, many of us recognize that this is disproportionately killing disabled Palestinians and it's disabling Palestinians. And we see this also, we think about not just Palestine but we're talking about Sudan, Congo where people are for Western conveniences. In the Congo, there's this cobalt mining that's going on. And so, we really have to think about what can we do to show solidarity in the global south. I feel like sometimes there's this few that disability rights in the United States have really been achieved by if we get more disabled people in C-suites and in these corporations and giving accolades to corporations that do disability inclusion whenever these corporations are sometimes weapons manufacturers that are disabling people around the world.

So, disability solidarity means calling for peace, calling for support in international aid to help people instead of escalating aggressions. And a lot of that also is making sure that we can boost the messages of folks that are out there. One thing that I started last year was adding alternative texts to the stories of disabled Palestinians and Palestinians in general as they talked about what was going on. So, putting that information out there, making it accessible and finding ways to support the work of organizers, disabled organizers around the world as they fight for justice and equality is really important.

Justice Shorter:

Hashtag alt text for Palestine.

Sarah Blahovec:

Yeah, alt text Palestine, yes.

Justice Shorter:

Alt text Palestine. If you had a message of solidarity that could go directly to the individuals who you mentioned in Palestine and then Sudan and in Congo and Haiti and Tigray, what would that message of solidarity be?

Sarah Blahovec:

That message of solidarity would be that I don't support what my government's doing and, in many cases, with what's called western diplomacy, disabled people see what's going on, we are standing by you. We believe that liberation needs to be something for all of us and that disability rights in the United States should not be based on a foundation of oppressing disabled people and other people, non-disabled people around the world. Because that's what we're seeing a lot of times where we've had some of these discussions about you need to look away from this because we have important issues at home that we need to focus on. I think we can focus on both of those things and I think we need to focus on both of those things because I cannot support a shallow view of disabled people having the same access to being in weapons manufacturers and war profiteers C-suites as some sort of advancement for the disability community whenever it's increasing profits of these companies and increasing the disablement, mass disablement of people around the globe.

So, my message is free Palestine, free Sudan, free Congo, free Haiti. We need to say that, we need to see more disabled leaders say that even if it makes them uncomfortable as I think it does. I think there was a lot of hesitation to talk about these issues especially in the context of the US election but we cannot have disability rights, we cannot have disability justice based on the oppression of people in the global south and disabled people elsewhere in the world.

Justice Shorter:

Mm-hmm, could not have said it better. I want to give us a few moments to transition into a closing vision here. It is something that we do every time before we close out each podcast episode now and I want you to complete this scene for me. It is 11:00 PM on Tuesday, November 7th, 2028, where do you hope to find yourself? What political victories will we as people with disabilities have accomplished throughout the past four years? How does it make you feel? What did we do to successfully and collectively arrive at this moment?

Sarah Blahovec:

Wow, that's a good question and I didn't realize until you sent me that question that my birthday does fall on election day once again. So, November 7th will be my birthday because it always adds more pressure. So, it's hard because I feel like we, in so many ways, we are fighting from a position of defense and we have been. We've been trying to defend ourselves against a pandemic and a country that has largely memory hold the pandemic. I literally had someone ask me the other day, they were just astounded that I wear a mask in public because I have to do that because I'm immunocompromised. I want to see a more empathetic country. I feel like, with the pandemic, with the genocide, I feel like there's been so much empathy that has been missing. I feel like, in 2020, we were asked to care about people other than ourselves for a couple of weeks and it brought up some challenges, it definitely changed the way people had to live their lives and it's a struggle.

And I feel like ... Imani Barbarin has talked about this a lot after the 1918 flu pandemic where we saw a global shift into fascism. And I feel like a lot of what we have seen was really expected from how people acted about the pandemic and there's just been a loss of empathy and a further delving down into individualism where ... Well, I'm going to focus on myself and keeping myself safe, and sometimes that comes really from a place of self-preservation, but what we need right now is community. So, I can say that I hope we see certain policy wins. Of course, I hope we save the Affordable Care Act and Medicaid and the Department of Education and all of these things that we're concerned about. But my win would be seeing our communities understand that we need empathy and not individualism, that we need to support people's freedom and not support genocide, that we need to care about public health and not focus on just getting back to normal and acting like things didn't change after 2020, that we need to make sacrifices whenever it comes to the climate emergency.

I know we talk a lot about climate emergency, it's all of the governments and the corporations, but there's also individual actions that we should be taking that we can work as a community to shift our habits and activities because it's really, if we want to try to stave off the worst of this climate emergency, it's going to take all of us to be able to do that. So, what I'm hoping to see is a revival of this empathy, a revival of community care. I think that's what we need so much right now because I've seen so much vitriol and hate over the past couple of years and I feel like, with the frustrations about the election, I've seen even more of that from folks who should be allied in the cause. A lot of finger pointing on this group didn't support what I support so we should get angry at each other about it and it's just eroding community. So, seeing a focus on community and being able to build up that empathy, I think, would be the biggest win for me.

Justice Shorter:

For those who share such a vision, where can they find you? How can they follow your work?

Sarah Blahovec:

So, yeah, for Disability Victory, we're at disabilityvictory.org. We're going to continue the work of trying to engage disabled people to run for office particularly at the local level because every city councilor who's fighting for accessible infrastructure, every school board member who is fighting to protect disabled, queer and trans and Black indigenous, students of color, they make a difference and we need to support that work within the systems. Personally, you can find me, I'm a little bit less on Twitter but haven't completely left and Bluesky [@sblahove](https://bsky.app/profile/sblahove), so going to continue talking there about all of these things. And sometimes there are uncomfortable contradictions in this work talking about getting folks into community positions in elected office whenever it feels like government is really eroding and a lot of folks have, I think very rightfully, been disenchanted and disillusioned by this system. But going to continue to try to fight for the safety and liberation of all people and especially marginalized people whether that's through the day job of Disability Victory and all my other civic engagement work or through activism so, yeah.

Justice Shorter:

Sarah, thank you so much for joining us. We deeply appreciate you being present during today's conversation and we so immensely appreciate and have gratitude for all of the work that you do. Thank you.

Sarah Blahovec:

Thank you.