MUSIC:

Da-da.

Da-da, da-da.

Disability inclusion required.

Justice Shorter:

Seasons Greetings, good people, and welcome back to another episode of Disability Inclusion: Required, the very last episode of the year, if you can believe it. I am your host, Justice Shorter, and today we are wrapping up the year by unwrapping some of the collective victories led by the disability community this year. We have had several hard knocks to be sure, but one thing's for certain. We will never stop believing or building on behalf of our people. Sandy Ho, Executive Director of the Disability and Philanthropy Forum joins us today to recap the year, and lift up those wins. Because lest we forget, 'tis the season to celebrate. Let's get into it. Sandy, happy holidays. How you doing?

Sandy Ho:

Hey, Justice. Great to be back. Hanging in there. Happy holidays to you as well.

Justice Shorter:

Come on now. We are all hanging in there. Every single day we are hanging in there. Is there anything that you're doing that makes it a little bit easier to hang in there every day? Do you have something special? Do you eat chocolate in the morning? Do you have something special, like a specialty tea that you drink at night? What's helping you hang in there?

Sandy Ho:

Yeah, no, that's a great question. So I am based in the Bay Area and have recently taken up birding. And what's helping me is just to step away from my computer and spend some time looking at the birds.

Justice Shorter:

Wow. Have you seen anything wonderful that has made you smile, or shocked you like, "My goodness, I did not think I was going to see that particular specimen out here while I'm birding."

Sandy Ho:

Yeah. Well, there's actually in the neighborhood park that I live a few blocks from, there's a, what I believe to be a resident barn owl. And so that's always special to see, to see an owl. And yeah, no, I'm just always so fascinated by birds. So I was born and raised in Boston, and in the East Coast, it's a different climate, so we get different species out here.

Justice Shorter:

Yes, absolutely. Well, listen, the entire episode today is about celebration. However, I would be remiss if we didn't start off by sprinkling some warm words onto those who truly did struggle this year. So what is your message to the folks who are more worried and weary than ever about the state of the world here at the end of 2025?

Sandy Ho:

Anybody who has been in conversation with me knows that I am not one to shy away from just telling it like it is. And I think in this moment in particular, it's really important that we are validating and

reaffirming each other's wariness. And the struggle is real. I don't want to be disingenuous about that because so many of our good friends, family or communities have been attacked and this has been challenging, to say the least. And at the same time, that we are not doing any of this work and that we are not existing in this moment alone or in silos, that at the same time of these just mind-boggling upheavals and the unraveling of our basic input record in civil society and democratic institutions and on and on and on that we have also seen in response to that, the way folks have come together, whether it's locally or across the state and even at the national level.

And so my message to folks who are worried and worried is that, yeah, it is real and we should be worried, that we should be concerned. And also I hope that folks are able to do their worrying and they're worrying together and with like-minded friends and allies and truly those who they are also being supported by.

Justice Shorter:

Find you some community. Yeah, we're going to talk a little bit about finding community and found family in just a few. But before we do that, I want to go on over to a few gifts that keep on giving. Can you shout out for us at least four phenomenal philanthropic programs or projects that you are really proud to see in the world this year?

Sandy Ho:

Yeah. So one of the positive outcomes and more refreshing responses from philanthropy in the sector is that as a result and now come from the federal funding cut and attack our communities, and especially around the intentional and by design sowing of distrust by our government, I have been, and I was heartened to see that several foundations immediately moved to increase their grant making and their payouts beyond the minimum 5% that is required by the IRS. So even though moving dollars out is just one aspect of our sector's work to say that it is very much needed for movements in this moment would be an understatement. And also, I really hope that this continues to contribute to the lasting change in the ways that philanthropy does things differently. The second, I want to shout out a specific foundation, which is the WITH Foundation, led by Ryan Easterly as response to the direct budget cuts and unraveling of Medicaid and Medicare. WITH Foundation rose to the fore and to rose to the occasion to fund directly new efforts that support defending Medicaid and Medicare for adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

And I thought that this was not just a model of how one foundation is responding in this moment, but it's also one of the few ways that philanthropy through its grant making mechanisms, it can be an ally, can be an advocate alongside disabled community. And I saw the ways that this directly address the threats that are at the local, state and national levels.

The third that comes to mind is a lot of our work in philanthropy, we think of this moment as just this moment, but when we talk to disabled community leaders and movement leaders, and we also know that this is not, we are not advocating and fighting for this moment, but really for the long game and the long term. And so when I recently learned about the SCAN Foundation's announcement of a new aging and disability health policy lab, they made an $8 million three-year commitment, really to ensure that the future is not just led by disabled people, but that conversation and decisions around aging in this country are also informed by lived experiences of disabled people. So this health policy lab will be rooted in those experiences in addition to the research analysis that drives the kind of policy change that really will ensure that there is not just a disability justice feature, but that there is a more equitable way in which everybody in this country can age on their own terms.

And then last but not least, I am going to do a little bit of self-organization congratulations-

Justice Shorter:

Come on. Come on, this is the time.

Sandy Ho:

But of course, the Disability Philanthropy Forum's first ever Learning Institute happened just a few weeks ago and you were the incredible MC of the-

Justice Shorter:

I was indeed.

Sandy Ho:

Disability Justice Learning Institute. And this was the first time our organization did convene funders who are either at the early learning stages or maybe they're already funding and doing this work on disability justice or climate, but so rarely do we see more intentional conversation than bring priorities and specifically elevating movement leaders and disabled folks who are already doing this work to be really at the center of the conversation.

Justice Shorter:

Indeed. You mentioned Ryan Easterly. He's also a friend of the pod. He's not only a friend of DPF, but he's a friend of the pod in general. He and I were on an episode of Disability Inclusion: Required several years ago. I want to say maybe 2020 or 2021. So folks, if you want to go back through and check out the archives, there's a wonderful conversation with Ryan and I, and I believe it is around disability justice and ways to think about environmental justice as well. So I hope that you'll go back and check that out. Sandy, you mentioned the importance of having these very intentional conversations, and that was really the goal around you all putting together that disability justice and environmental justice Learning Institute a few weeks ago. But tell me, why is it so important to move, not just from conversations, but also to move towards commitments as well?

How do we turn those conversations, those intentional conversations into commitments from organizations to get out there and get the work done or support the groups who are on the ground getting the work done?

Sandy Ho:

Yeah, that's a great question. And when we think about commitment to disability justice values and the framework and the original intention of those 10 movement principles, which are all oriented to dismantling ableism, one of the 10 principles is an anti-capitalist politic. And as somebody who is leading an organization in the philanthropic sector, I'll go right ahead and own and say that whenever I brought that up in conversation, sometimes there's a little bit of nervousness and people get on edge because philanthropy is about moving the dollars and this capitalist system that we all exist in, that is very much a part of our power and program influence to change outcomes for so many communities.

But when we think about commitments though, it is not that we are here to require and expect that everybody in the sector is going to get this immediately right every single time right out the gate, but a commitment means that we are honoring the intention of constantly practicing and doing better and that we are improving our practices and that just because in this moment, we may not fully arrive at all 10 principles collectively, it's not an excuse to justify not doing the work at all.

And I think that is the point that I really want to impress upon my fellow colleagues in the sector is, just as one example, the Disability Philanthropy Forum, we every other year put out the Disability Inclusion Pledge Survey. And this past year was a survey here. And so in 2026, those who completed their survey will be provided the results on how they are doing in terms of holding their own work and foundations

accountable to disability rights and inclusion and disability justice. But that commitment is so important and it remains one of the reasons for why if you sign on to the pledge, you're not making a financial commitment. Anybody can sign on to the pledge, but it really is about, is your foundation and is your organization, does it have the internal will to change and really talk seriously about the systemic challenges that are not just getting in the way of disability funding, but for all of our work together.

Justice Shorter:

Well said. I want to shift us, if I can, over to a little bit of story time, Sandy, if that's all right with you, because this season often has us thinking a lot about family. So can you share a story that exemplifies the magic of found family in disability solidarity?

Sandy Ho:

Absolutely. And I so appreciate this question, Justice, because as you and many in our world, in our country know, recently Alice Wong passed away. And it's hard to talk about her without getting choked up. But I came across Alice, I think it was 15 years or so ago, and I've been reflecting not just on our friendship, but also on her influence on me and the work and how I show up in the world and my advocacy and the disability movement and being a disabled community member. But I also wanted to share who I was as a younger child before I met Alice. So as a much younger person, like many others of us, I was the only disabled person in my family. I have two brothers and was often the only disabled student in my school, in my class. And I had friends and I was participating in school and clubs and activities and afterschool programs and whatnot, but there was always a part of me that I didn't quite ever get to express.

And I lived in a very deeply creative and imaginary world. As a child, I was constantly playing imaginary... I have imaginary friends and this is going to age me, but I was also the child of the late 80s, early 90s. And I don't know if folk remember, but you know the cup on the screen telephone?

Justice Shorter:

Yes. I remember.

Sandy Ho:

Yeah. I would sometimes have imaginary conversations with my imaginary friend on the other line of that cup string telephone. And it really wasn't until more recently that I realized, oh wow, Alice was the friend that I was looking for in my imaginary days of having imaginary friends. She was that other friend that I had so wished to have as a kid. And of course, now as an adult, I think back and I'm like, wow, there's really nobody else who could friend in the ways that Alice friended. But I share that story because yes, we bonded over disability solidarity and our activism and our advocacy and our shared love of books and writing, but she really is family to me. And I think about her often, of course, but this is also going to be a season of grieving for so many of us. And I know I say this now, but I truly don't yet know even the impact of it, but I truly believe that this is going to be a lifelong living for me.

But yeah, thank you for inviting me to share that.

Justice Shorter:

Absolutely. Alice Wong, a friend and a force throughout the disability community and beyond. Truly, there are few spaces, at least within the disability and the disability justice community, particularly where her brilliance, where her light, where her creativity did not reach. Literally, I communicate and connect with a lot of people on creative ideas and initiatives that we're trying to get sprung up and folks will point to the, "Hey, Alice was involved in this or Alice. Alice was involved in that and she has some really good insights on this piece. And it is wonderful to know that her imprints will forever be on the work that we

do moving forward." And that in and of itself is indeed another gift. So I'm so appreciative that you mentioned Alice and you shared those stories, the friend on the other end of that cup and our cup runneth over with all of the gifts that she bestowed on this world and that she continues to, even from the other side of the ancestral plane.

I want to shift us over to now a few countdowns. We're getting into the end of the year here, Sandy. And so with that comes all of these countdowns that comes with the new year and closing out the current year. So can you give us a countdown of the top five 2025 disability policy wins in your opinion?

Sandy Ho:

Yeah, this was a hard question. I'm not going to lie, and I definitely had to use one of my phone-a-friend cards for this one, but I did come up with five and they kind of span across issue areas and both at the local and federal level. So locally, being part of the Bay Area community here, one of the wins is the launch of the San Francisco Disability Cultural Center. And this is a win, not only because of the enormous rate of so much of disability rights and independent living movement that happened in Berkeley and the Bay Area, but this is the country's first publicly-funded disability cultural center. And this is huge because when we come together as a community and recognize the cultural power and political power of disabled communities, we move beyond just compliance and we move beyond just direct services. So definitely a win.

The second, out of the education space, which I know is given the incredibly disappointing gutting of the special education office. Recently, it was this past summer, the Supreme Court decision in AJT versus OCO area schools really unanimously rather reaffirmed that discrimination claims that were brought forward under the Americans with Disabilities Act in Section 504 by students with disabilities don't need to then make any additional claims or justification. So in other words, to me, what this means is that there is not a separate context in which disability civil rights stand and when they are or they are not applicable, that disability civil rights are civil rights. And when there are cases of discrimination, that's exactly what it is, and that's what school districts across the country need to be held accountable to.

The third, and I'm just going to knock on wood somewhere, but this comes out of the tech world. So to date, the wide accessibility regulations are still in effect. And this is really important and critical because when we think about the power of not just how we go about our day-to-day life, but the power of disability community advocacy that happens online, the ways that remote work has opened so many economic opportunities and possibilities for so many, but this means that all public-facing content are required to be accessible to ensure that there's equal access in 2026.

Justice Shorter:

I literally use this and train on this all the time, but I use assistive technology, so I cannot even operate in the digital space without the guidelines and the access that comes as a result of those guidelines. Absolutely.

Sandy Ho:

Yes. And thank you for the training that you do, and shout out to Justice and the many hats that you wear. The fourth is at the federal level, and I say this one with the greatest soul, because as we all know, there was this major budget cut to a lot of the major federal programs that support really the direct access for disabled people to remain in the community, but they had not been outright eliminated. So these include the National Institute on Disability Independent Living and Rehabilitation Research, [inaudible 00:23:10] the Councils on Developmental Disabilities and the Protection and the Advocacy Programs are a few. And again, this is what it means to be a part of a marginalized community that we are expected to feel relief when we are served crumbs.

And so I just want to contextualize that one to say it is a wing, but also it's not. And then the fifth is not really a direct disability policy or community, but what I wanted to point out is that so many disabled people and disabled leaders, disability-led organization are still fighting, are still advocating, are still pushing forward and are really so unfazed, so unbothered by this administration's attacks, their bullying and really their empty commitments. And in a lot of cases, they're blatant discrimination and just the ways in which our community has remained so fierce and solid in the face of such violence and harm.

Justice Shorter:

Absolutely. Absolutely. This is also a season of many beloved traditions. So I want us now to turn towards transformative traditions. Are there any new practices of disability justice or transformative justice that you would really love to carry into 2026? And if so, tell us, what makes these particular practices so amazing that you would want them to become collective or annual traditions for us now?

Sandy Ho:

Yeah. So when I think about new practices, this isn't necessarily new, but it has returned to me more consistently with just journaling and not just learning about the challenges in the moment, but also having some quiet time between myself and the paper or the blank computer screen in front of me to just write, because I think for so many of us, we are constantly inundated, what is the next thing? What is the next headline? What is the next outrageous decision happening out of DC that it is by design, right? They are doing this by design. And so whatever we can do for ourselves to protect and also find peace for ourselves I think is so important. And I think it really gets to that practice and principle of sustainability that I am not just somebody who is here to fulfill my role and responsibilities as ED of the Disability and Philanthropy Forum, but also here because I deeply believe in the right and also in the truth that disability justice generations will happen, whether or not we are making the quote unquote right or moral decisions of this moment.

And so that principle around sustainability has also gotten me to think a lot more about legacy, and it is of course also in light of Alice Wong's passing, but the legacy that disability movement leaves from one generation to another is so precarious. And in a way that I had not really perceived and understood until this moment that with one election, with one decision from the Supreme Court or Congress, that decades of disability rights progress is rolled back. And it is sobering, but it's also heavy to hold. And so I guess, I don't know if it's an annual creation, but just really taking stock and making sure that I'm also asking questions about, well, what is your organization doing to not just pave the way for the future, but what are we doing to also archive our efforts of the past?

Justice Shorter:

You talked about documenting your current thoughts. You talked about archiving the work. You also mentioned the word distraction. And it of course makes me think of Toni Morrison, who famously says that racism in and of itself is a distraction. It keeps you from truly doing the work that you wish to do. It puts you in a space of constantly having to react and recover from the ravages of discrimination and hatred and prejudicial treatment. And I think to your point, there have been just so many attacks, political and policy attacks on marginalized communities and folks are trying to figure out how do they ground themselves, how do they root themselves so that they can not only withstand all of those really difficult blows, but also grow something anew and something that can continue to fruit for future generations, which is so important. I want to talk to us about the future a little bit here because we're coming into a new year, and this means that we're of course thinking about and gestating new dreams.

So what does DPF have in store for their philanthropic sector in 2026?

Sandy Ho:

Yeah. I just want to add one more comment to what you just shared, and also to some of the earlier wins of disability progress this year, the idea that growing old is not an assurance that many of us have in our community. And so that project of legacy leaving, I kind of joke now to that in some spaces and in some events when I show up, the younger folks are like, "Oh, auntie is here." And I'm like, "Excuse me." I guess that just means that I have lived and learned a few things, but yeah, so thinking about into the future of DPF and next year, so as I mentioned earlier, the Disability Inclusion Pledge, the survey that this past year of 2025 was a survey year.

So next year, early in quarter one, we will be reporting out on the philanthropic sector's trends around disability justice, rights, and inclusion. I'm happy and relieved even to share that there are some key progress areas that the sector has made, but of course there are also a lot of growing edges for the field. So really focusing next year on a lot of accountability and the importance of disability data and preserving that because as we've seen by the federal government, the attacks to publicly available and publicly funded disability data is not something that we can count on in this moment.

The other report that I'm excited to share with our sector is this past year, in partnership with the Lurie Institute over at Brandeis University, we have been connecting a focus group and a project on the experiences of economic mobility among Black disabled families across the country. So this is not about the typical research perhaps where we're comparing Black disabled families with non-Black disabled families, but no, this is really a focus on what have Black disabled families supported and are sharing and talking about that has helped their families across generations that they experience economic mobility whether it's upwards or downwards. And I'm really excited to share some of those findings and those stories.

Justice Shorter:

Oh, I'm looking forward to that. You will have to keep us updated and even come back or have folks who were involved in this study come back and we'll plan a whole episode around that if that's possible.

Sandy Ho:

Yeah.

Justice Shorter:

Yeah, that sounds amazing. I want to close us out here, Sandy, with a little bit of hope for the holidays. What makes you the most hopeful for 2026?

Sandy Ho:

I think that what I'm finding hope in is that of a community that has, as I said, always expected to your gratitude for crumbs and the bare minimum compliance that we still have each other and that disabled people are still finding ways to come together to experience joy and respite and that we are checking in on each other in ways that I wish that we didn't have to. That is the whole burden of systemic oppression that we shouldn't have to fight for crumbs. But, this is the hope that I'm hanging onto is that we are as a movement continuing to be loud, to show up in conversations in decision making where we are not expected or necessarily even wanted in this moment, but we are asserting ourselves and making sure that we are also staying safe and that we are taking care of one another.

Justice Shorter:

Be loud, show up, be assertive, take care of one another. Sandy, thank you so much for joining us. We will all continue onward and upward. Cheers to a new year.

Sandy Ho:
Thank's Justice.

Justice Shorter:
Mm-hmm.