

Quest PODCAST



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Episode 45- Making Space and Creating Pathways with Keely Cat-Wells

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Mindy Henderson: Welcome to the Quest podcast, proudly presented by the Muscular Dystrophy Association, as part of the Quest family of content. I'm your host, Mindy Henderson.

Together, we are here to bring thoughtful conversation to the neuromuscular disease community and beyond about issues affecting those with neuromuscular disease and other disabilities, and those who love them. We are here for you to educate and inform, to demystify, to inspire, and to entertain. We are here, shining a light on all that makes you you. Whether you are one of us, love someone who is, or are on another journey altogether, thanks for joining.

Now, let's get started. October is National Disability Employment Awareness Month. And I am here to talk with a heavy hitter in the disability community, Keely Cat-Wells, who is an entrepreneur and disability rights advocate dedicated to driving social, systemic, and economic change. After experiencing a multitude of health issues that resulted in a physical disability, Keely focused her career on advocacy and inclusion in entertainment.

Keely is a public speaker and staunch advocate for disability rights and mental health awareness. She's a founding member of the WeThe15 campaign, which is considered the most significant human rights movement in sports history.

Keely has presented to national leaders, including a little guy you may be familiar with, named President Joe Biden. She's delivered speeches to the UN and large companies and organizations, and has received numerous awards and honors, including, but not only, the Forbes 30 Under 30 and Great British Entrepreneur of the Year.

Keely, I am so happy you're here.

Keely Cat-Wells: Oh, thank you so much for having me. I am thrilled to be here speaking with one of my role models. [inaudible 00:02:14].

Mindy Henderson: Oh, thank you. Likewise. My goodness. Well, I'm going to jump in because there is so much here to talk about. You also, which I didn't mention in the intro... But you are also the co-founder and CEO of a company called Making Space, which does amazing things, including providing training to individuals living with disabilities who are wanting to get into the workforce. So, do you mind just starting at the beginning, just talk a little bit about your background and what inspired you to focus on the work that you do?

Keely Cat-Wells: Yeah, absolutely. So, oh, goodness, where do we begin?

Mindy Henderson: I always hate that question.

Keely Cat-Wells: How far back should we go?

Mindy Henderson: Exactly.

Keely Cat-Wells: So, this transparently was not the plan. I had the dream from a young age of being a dancer and going primarily into musical theater. I was bullied pretty badly in school. So, my mom put me in dance class and I fell in love with it. And I started to realize, as I got to probably around the age of maybe 9 or 10, that I could actually make a living from doing something that I loved. And because of that, I was determined to go to dance college when I was a teen.

I ended up getting into a very prestigious academy. And then, just soon into that training, I ended up feeling really unwell. So, went to the doctors, shared my symptoms. They didn't do any tests. They just said, "It's all in your head. You're making it up. You're attention seeking," and, "Go away and do some meditation and then you'll be fine." Was not fine.

Mindy Henderson: [inaudible 00:04:11].

Keely Cat-Wells: And it really just took to the point of me becoming so unbelievably unwell that I was dying, that anyone did anything. And I ended up being hospitalized for about four years, went through many, many surgeries, and a lot of medical malpractice, a lot of medical trauma, and came out the other end as a disabled person.

And that was really the start of my next chapter, which led to me moving to the US and wanting to find a path back into the creative industries, which was just my passion and what I loved so much. And as soon as I got a job within the industry, after disclosing and asking for reasonable accommodations, I got told that I could no longer have a job.

So, that was, I would say again, another light bulb moment. And just another chapter, the start of C Talent, which was my first company, which was a talent agency that represented disabled actors, writers, directors, content creators, and athletes. And we had the goal of changing the way the world views and defines disability using the massive reach and power that we have within the entertainment and media industries. So, we placed talent within high profile projects in Hollywood and brokered deals for people with major brands. And then, that company was acquired by a marketing firm back in 2022. I met Sophie Morgan and-

Mindy Henderson: Love her.

Keely Cat-Wells: ... [inaudible 00:05:50] chapter began.

Mindy Henderson: Yes.

Keely Cat-Wells: And we created Making Space and Making Space Media, which is what we're currently working on and building, which is both a tech company and also a media company.

Mindy Henderson: It's so impressive. I mean, if we had the time, I would sit here and talk about all of the amazing things that you have done with this company, but there's just too much to mention. It's so impactful, and you are really making waves and creating opportunities for people, which is that's the end goal and what the world so desperately needs.

So, do you mind telling us a little bit more about the individuals that you work with and some of the... I want to drill into the training piece of this a little bit, some of the skills that you focus on developing in people during your training programs.

Keely Cat-Wells: Yeah, absolutely. So, Making Space is a talent acquisition and learning platform for companies to train, access, and retain disabled talent. And we really have this theory of change that, if we put accessible education, skill-based education at the forefront of the hiring process, we can get disabled people into higher paying, higher quality careers, and not just... And I say careers, very firstly, because we really believe that disabled people deserve the careers of their dreams as opposed to just jobs that are going to maybe pay the bills.

So, the way that it works is it's not your traditional certificate program or Coursera course. What we really do is work with our partner companies, which

is like NBC, Netflix, Indeed, and we take specific job openings that they have and turn that into very job-specific education. And then, anyone who completes their education on Making Space then goes into a pre-qualified pipeline for that role and for that company.

Mindy Henderson: Amazing.

Keely Cat-Wells: And everything on the platform, education-wise is... Well, everything, the whole platform is, and always will be, completely free for disabled talent. And it's the employers that pay to use the platform.

Mindy Henderson: Wow. Now, that I didn't know. That's incredible. What a brilliant service that you're providing people.

Keely Cat-Wells: Thank you.

Mindy Henderson: Yes. Oh, my goodness. So, the trainings then, do you do one-on-one training? Or is it more video modules that people can complete at their discretion, at their pace?

Keely Cat-Wells: Yeah, self-serve and on-demand content, video-based content that anyone can choose to complete at any time. It is accessible beyond basic compliance. We've got the ability for people to turn on and off sign language interpretation, change the color, font size of captions, keyboard preferences, compatibility with assistive tech, audio description. All the things. All the things.

Mindy Henderson: Amazing, and I love what you just said, it made my heart swell, "Accessibility beyond compliance". I mean, what a novel idea that is. That's amazing. So, tell me, what are some examples of things that people could come to your website and find courses and things for?

Keely Cat-Wells: So, I would say one of my favorite courses on the platform is the Netflix course that we did with them around key art, which is a very specific part of the graphic design world, and it's focused on creating posters for shows and for films. And in the Netflix course, they really hone in on specifics, on the Netflix-specific concepts, and lighting that they use, and the systems that they use. And you get a really good insight into what it's also like to be a graphic designer or key artist at Netflix.

And Netflix are continuously hiring from, or considering, those people that complete that course and who are in that pipeline. So, it's an evergreen pipeline too. So, it's not just a dead end. When you've completed that course, it's not just a thing that you can put on your resume. Of course, you can put it on your resume, but it's also a opportunity to be in that pipeline and to actually have that direct opportunity for employment.

Mindy Henderson: Wow, that's really cool. So, what are some of the common challenges that you face in doing this work, and creating trainings, and marketing the trainings?

Keely Cat-Wells: Great question. I would say we really want to open this up to as many people as we possibly can, who may have not even considered a career in the job-specific training that we provide. We got a lot of feedback from some of our users on the platform who said, after they completed the Netflix course, that, "I never even realized that opportunity at Netflix would be accessible for me or that kind of job would be something that I could do."

And that's also something that we want to do, is just open up the ambitions and the goals of people who have been forced by society to think that we are less than, or should [inaudible 00:11:37] less than non-disabled people. And we're really passionate about developing and supporting the next generation of disabled leaders. So, yeah, I would say one of the challenges is just reaching that broad, broad network of people.

Mindy Henderson: Interesting. You triggered a couple of thoughts in my mind when you were answering that question. And so, I think that we're all aware, in the entertainment industry, of a lot of the stigmas and resistance that still exists to disability inclusion and things like that. I guess first part of this question is do you see it improving? Do you think that we're making progress in mainstream Hollywood and the mainstream entertainment field to be more accepting and inclusive?

Keely Cat-Wells: I am an incredibly optimistic person.

Mindy Henderson: Yeah.

Keely Cat-Wells: So, I would have to say, "Yes, hello, we see so much improvement." I mean, I do think where we are today is so much further than where we were five years ago. When I first moved to LA, I was in rooms with incredibly passionate disabled professionals and advocates who had been working for decades on making Hollywood more inclusive and accessible. And they were just hitting roadblock after roadblock. And I think we have seen people break through. We've had these milestone wins. We've had CODA. We've had Peanut Butter Falcon. We've got that show on Disney Plus, which I'm now forgetting the name of-

Mindy Henderson: I know what you're talking about.

Keely Cat-Wells: ... [inaudible 00:13:21] Phoebe. Yeah.

Mindy Henderson: Yes.

Keely Cat-Wells: [inaudible 00:13:23] actor with CP. I think we're seeing more and more big, big projects with disabled leads, which is phenomenal. But I think we're also not seeing the massive lack of representation behind the screens and in leadership

positions. The first thing, the first kind of domino to fall I think is that very visual in your face, like "Look what we're doing." Like, "This is... We're doing the work." But we often don't see behind the curtain.

Mindy Henderson: Very true.

Keely Cat-Wells: And I think that's where the majority of work now needs to happen. So, they're not just big milestone moments, they're constant and it's always happening. It doesn't necessarily need a massive press release or big moment. It's just always there. But I think we're getting there.

Mindy Henderson: That's really interesting perspective. And I have to agree with you, I think it's a lot more... Just as a bystander, turning on my television once or twice a day, and seeing things online, and going to the movies, it is more commonplace to see someone who is a wheelchair user or with any myriad of kinds of disabilities than you used to. I think it's becoming a lot more common.

And what I love about what you just said is that the behind the scenes work, it sounds like, is a lot of what you're targeting your training to, because the second part of my question was going to be... And again, I think that you kind of alluded to this, but how much do you think people self-select out of careers in this field, either because they don't think that they'll be accepted, or given opportunities, or things like that or, even maybe more painfully, don't believe that they can do this work? Do you see much of that?

Keely Cat-Wells: I do. I really do. And I think the other thing is, disability aside, a career in the creative industries to most people is like, "What? Is that even possible?" They just think of the screenwriter, director, producer-

Mindy Henderson: Right.

Keely Cat-Wells: ... and forget about things like production accountants, and script supervisors, and people who work in the legal departments, and all of these other... There's a myriad of opportunities.

Mindy Henderson: Yeah.

Keely Cat-Wells: Something I'm also passionate about is showcasing to the world that there is so much more than just those actor, writer, director. But I do think, with the disabled people, an example that I use often is when I first moved to LA, it became so glaringly obvious that trying to get an entry level position in the entertainment industry was going to be nearly impossible. Because there is this constant prioritization of stamina over talent, where those entry level positions would be like, "You have to lift a certain amount of weight. You have to drive a car." You have to do all of these endurance related tasks that don't actually correlate to really any skill.

And then, the roles that are slightly higher than that say, "You must have prior experience." How can we get prior experience if we can't do those entry level positions? So, then we're stuck in this cycle of unemployment.

Mindy Henderson: It's true. So, are there things, that either in your training or otherwise, and in other work that you do, ways that you work with people to help them overcome barriers to employment, like societal stigmas and things that still exist, and help get them into... It's kind of a head space issue of helping them to think differently about how marketable they are and how they're going to potentially be successful in these fields.

Keely Cat-Wells: Yeah. One of the things that we are aiming to do is we're utilizing the education on Making Space as a new pathway to employment. So, instead of that entry level position that may be completely inaccessible to many of us, is this training could kind of be subsidized as that prior experience. And anyone who completes that gets to go through this different door into the industry or into roles.

And then, the other piece of what we do is education for the employers. Because as we know, it's usually not us. So, it's really supporting them with creating more accessible and inclusive processes, and educating the hiring managers and recruiters on how to create more accessible processes.

And then, I guess a third thing that we do is we've built this new tool. It's an AI tool. And it turns the lived experiences of disability into transferable skills. So, it's just like your basic chatbot, but it will ask questions about your prior career experiences, the barriers that you face in society. And then, based on that, it will say, "Oh, you could have product management skills or skills that support supply chain management." Or-

Mindy Henderson: Wow.

Keely Cat-Wells: ... [inaudible 00:19:14] skills based off lived experience, which is good.

Mindy Henderson: That's so interesting. That literally gave me goosebumps. What a cool piece of technology. I had a 20-year career in high-tech before doing what I do now. And so, that fascinates me. And back in the day, it was all about you would go and take these career aptitude tests and things like that. And now, it sounds like you're putting it right at people's fingertips and helping them drill into what some of the careers that maybe they haven't thought of, like you said. That's amazing.

Keely Cat-Wells: Yeah, sharing and showing people how these transferable skills could absolutely relate to different industries, different roles. And then, it also will support with suggested educational experiences-

Mindy Henderson: Yeah.

Keely Cat-Wells: ... people generally take to support with getting into those other opportunities.

Mindy Henderson: I love it. I'm sitting here thinking I want to carve out some time this afternoon, and go play on your website a little bit this afternoon, and see all of this in action. If you were going to give a Netflix, or a Hulu, or some... I'm drawing a blank on other possible employers in this space. And you are going to give them one piece of advice to start down the path to being more inclusive, what would you say to them?

Keely Cat-Wells: I would say, first and foremost, hire disabled people, promote disabled people, fund disabled people, celebrate disabled people. And see disability as a competitive advantage rather than a negative.

And actually, around accommodations, I would say to reframe your thought around accommodations. We often talk about access requirements instead of accommodations because, I feel like accommodations, it puts the burden on us as disabled people. And it kind of makes it seem like the employer is doing a nice thing or they're doing you a favor by giving you this accommodation. But instead, the access requirement, it's a requirement for me to do my best work. So, I would say to even just reframe one's thinking around what we need to do our best work.

And then, the last thing I would say is use disabled-led businesses to support, as vendors, to support with the work that you're doing. Don't rely on your disabled employees, because we have to normalize disabled people being experts in subjects beyond disability.

Mindy Henderson: So true. And the other thing that I'll just throw out... Well, a couple of things I'm going to throw out there. On the accessibility front, I heard, and I can't take credit for it... A company that was doing some training with an organization that I work with, they talked about, instead of using the word accessibility, or I'm sorry, accommodations, to talk about it in terms of success enablers, because that... And I loved that so much because, to your point, number one, it takes the onus off of the employee to educate you or create what's needed for them. But it also puts us on, I think, a bit of a level playing field. Because if you look at it that way, it kind of throws disability out the window, and you really would be thinking of, "How do I just make my employees successful and what things can I implement to make that possible?" So, I wanted to add that to what you said.

Keely Cat-Wells: I love that.

Mindy Henderson: Yeah. So, for anyone listening, how would you say that the rest of us can get involved, and support organizations that are focused on this work, and help to keep some of the pressure on the industry to make changes?

Keely Cat-Wells: I would say absolutely continue to pull out bad representation. But equally, let's celebrate the companies when they do do something right.

Mindy Henderson: So true.

Keely Cat-Wells: That is the only way they're going to continue to do the right thing. And I think, as a community, we do a very good job at calling them out.

Mindy Henderson: Yeah.

Keely Cat-Wells: And rightly so.

Mindy Henderson: That's true.

Keely Cat-Wells: But we also need to do what we often preach, around taking the fear off things and off disability. And that burden should absolutely not be on us. But I think it's exciting when we do get to finally celebrate the wins and good representation.

Mindy Henderson: So true. It's like a positive versus negative reinforcement kind of a model, and I think there's a time and a place for both, but what you're saying really resonates. And if companies out there are doing the work, then absolutely they should be recognized for that and the work should be spotlighted.

And in fact, I started using a hashtag that I would love it if everybody else would use the hashtag also. But I started using [inclusion spotted](#).

Keely Cat-Wells: Oh, [inaudible 00:24:53].

Mindy Henderson: And I would post if I saw a Pizza Hut commercial with a person with a disability that happened to be in the commercial. I would post that. I've posted Gap ads before and a number of other things where I've seen inclusion pop up different places.

Keely Cat-Wells: I love it. Inclusion spotted, I love that.

Mindy Henderson: Inclusion spotted, yes. So, what final thoughts or messages do you want to share with our audience about the importance of inclusive employment training specifically? Let's turn back to that a little bit.

Keely Cat-Wells: I would say... There's so much. I mean, it makes me so sad to think that we are still twice as likely to be unemployed than non-disabled people. And it saddens me so much that we still have laws like Section 14(c).

Mindy Henderson: I know. For people who may not know who are listening, do you mind explaining what that is?

Keely Cat-Wells: Section 14(c), for those who don't know, is a very outdated discriminatory law which was put in place to, what the government thought, would support employers with employing more disabled people because they wouldn't have to pay them equal wage. It's less than minimum wage.

And still today, we have thousands of disabled people being paid cents on the dollar, sometimes even in candy, and often in... Well, always in things called sheltered workshops. Sheltered workshops are things that don't provide any career advancement opportunities, no development opportunities, and really just it's discrimination at its worst. And it makes me so upset and furious because I truly believe that if any job is benefiting an employer, it deserves an equal wage.

And disabled people are the last group left within the Fair Labor Standards Act. We're the last group to have not now received equal wages. So, there's some work to do.

Mindy Henderson: Yeah. Yeah, I agree with you. And I will say, I know that there are some states in the country that have banned sub-minimum wage, fortunately, but not all of them. Which, in 2024, it pains me to think that this is where we still are on some things.

I can't think of a company out there that doesn't offer some kind of training, whether it's employee training, or candidate training, or so many different things. What are some of the things that employers should be thinking about in terms of providing inclusive training for people with disabilities?

Keely Cat-Wells: When we started researching existing training and education, on both the employer side internally and also for candidates, job seekers, it was really shocking to find how many platforms and how much training is so inaccessible. Whether that be for the lack of sign language interpretation, or the lack of audio description, or even just the language that was used within the trainings, it's really poor. And also representation. I have barely seen any training, unless maybe it is a disability-specific training, that has disabled people within it.

And that's again, as I said earlier, normalizing disabled people, being experts and things beyond disability. We have to make sure disabled people are teaching and being the educators within these other trainings as well. So, I would say to employers, make it accessible, make it representative. And go beyond that basic compliance, that basic what should just be naturally done anyway. Let's look at accessibility as an opportunity rather than this problem to be solved.

Mindy Henderson: Thank you. I love that. You have such a way with words. And of course there are the people that you may be talking to right now, who are hearing this and want to do more. Of course, there are resources and all kinds of information out there that they could potentially find to help inform how they create trainings, and classes, and things like that. Which brings me back to Making Space. Where can people find more information? And we'll put all of this in the show notes. But where can people find more information about your organization and the programs that you offer?

Keely Cat-Wells: So, anyone can sign up. Check out Making Space at www.making-space.com. And as I say, it's completely free, always will be, for talent to sign up. You can explore various offerings. There's no commitment to say... If you're a job seeker, but you don't want to have a job within at Netflix, you can make sure that you're not visible to the employer. So, you can still benefit from the training.

Mindy Henderson: Interesting.

Keely Cat-Wells: Yeah. And then, employers can also do the same. Check out makingspace.com and sign up for a demo of the platform from their perspective. And then, my co-founder, Sophie Morgan, also has Making Space. She leads and runs Making Space Media. And you can also find more information about that on Making Space too.

Mindy Henderson: Wonderful. You are one of my favorite people. You're fantastic. Just what you have already done in your years, which I don't think are many, is so impressive. You're one of the leading advocates in the disability space in this country. And I know that people who know you, love you. And I am so grateful to you again for spending a few minutes out of your day with me, and sharing your wisdom, and helping contribute to National Disability Employment Awareness Month. Which hopefully, one day, because of the work that we're doing and the conversations we're having, we won't need a National Disability Employment Awareness Month. It will just be all the time.

Keely Cat-Wells: I enjoy you so much. So lucky to know you, and get to learn from you, and work with you, and collaborate. Thank you very much for having me.

Mindy Henderson: Thank you.

Mindy Henderson: Thank you for listening. For more information about the guests you heard from today, go check them out at mda.org/podcast. And to learn more about the Muscular Dystrophy Association, the services we provide, how you can get involved, and to subscribe to Quest Magazine or to Quest Newsletter, please go to mda.org/quest.

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Thanks, everyone. Until next time, go be the light we all need in this world.