

Transcript for Episode 1: A Conversation with Taylor Lindsay-Noel

Taylor: [00:00:00] The email came in a very simple email, actually deleted the email because I thought it was fake and then decided to take it out of the trash when I couldn't get my mind off of it. And it ended up being very real. And so after a few weeks, we were sending it to Gayle King and Oprah's home, so it was an extremely surreal experience.

Andrea: [00:00:32] Welcome to the first episode of Broadcastability, a podcast by for and about workers with disabilities and inclusive workplaces. It's part of the PROUD Project at the University of Toronto. You can find out more about the project on our website, theproudproject.ca

Chloe: [00:00:51] This podcast was recorded and produced on the traditional ancestral territories of the Huron Wendat, the Seneca, and the Mississauga of the Credit River. We would also like to acknowledge the other Indigenous lands across Turtle Island, where we conduct our research and record this podcast. Miigwech.

Chloe: [00:01:13] Hi, I'm Chloe Atkins, and I'm a political scientist at the University of Toronto, and I'm the lead investigator of the PROUD Project. I'm a bit of an oddball because I do work in medicine and disability, and Andrea Whiteley and I have worked together for a number of years.

Andrea: [00:01:27] Hi, I'm Andrea Whiteley, and I am the postdoctoral research fellow for the PROUD Project. I have a PhD in communications and I had the idea to create these podcasts as an innovative and compelling way to communicate our research to the public by allowing our research participants to tell their stories.

Chloe: [00:01:45] I'm really looking forward for people to hear what we've been doing and to hear from disabled people who are so successful in the workplace themselves.

Andrea: [00:01:53] Yeah, there's an advocacy element to these podcasts as well, because Chloe has a disability. I also have lived with disability and I'm a caregiver of somebody with a disability, because these podcasts are meant to kind of broadcast the ability of the people

we've met through our research study. Taylor Lindsay-Noel is from Toronto and is the founder of Cup of Té, Luxury Loose Leaf Teas.

Chloe: [00:02:20] You know, when I think about Taylor, the thing that really struck me was her drive and determination and her capacity to sort of reorient her life and really push forward on it. And so she really struck me as an entrepreneur.

Andrea: [00:02:38] I'm really excited to interview Taylor because since we've interviewed her for our PROUD Project research, I've come to really love her tea.

[Sounds of a kettle boiling, tea being poured, and a spoon stirring liquid in a cup]

Andrea: [00:03:02] So, Taylor, I have to tell you, I am really excited to talk to you again because when we talked originally in our first interview, we learned about your business. And then I was really curious and that is why I your products and I know this sounds like it might not sound real, but it's true. I love your tea and it is life changing for me, and I feel like I'm a little bit of a fangirl of you. Honestly, OK, I am drinking your tea right now, it's coconut cream.

Taylor: [00:03:35] That's a really great flavour.

Andrea: [00:03:39] It's so crazy because like I think of you every day, whenever I'm making this tea, I'm like, "Isn't that cool that I kind of know the person who made my everyday beverage?" To me, knowing the person who provides it is really, I think, very cool, and I have that ability to be grateful to a person.

Taylor: [00:04:00] Yeah, that's one of the best parts is like, it's so crazy to think that my tea and my products are incorporated into the daily lives of our customers. It's crazy. It's so crazy to me.

Andrea: [00:04:13] So I think that's a really good way to start is just to talk about your journey to becoming an entrepreneur. We're here to talk about disability and employment. So that's you as an entrepreneur, that's really, I think, intriguing and hopefully will be intriguing for our audience. So, yeah, can you tell us a little bit about how you got into the tea business?

Chloe: [00:04:36] Yeah, what your journey is like, whether you grew up wanting to be a tea woman.

Taylor: [00:04:42] So I definitely did not grow up wanting to be a tea woman. My friends call me the local tea lady. I don't think anyone really at five years old is like, "I want to own a tea company," but I kind of fell into it after my accident. I had my accident when I was 14 years old, and it was one of those things that I never saw coming. I was supposed to be an Olympic gymnast. And the next thing you know, I'm having an accident that leaves me paralyzed from the chest down. And I at the time thought I would become a sports doctor or a chiropractor, or somehow stay within the sport because that's what a lot of us do. So when that opportunity was taken away from me, I really had to reevaluate what I wanted to do, who I was separate from the sport, and that led me to going to university for radio and television arts. And when I was in school, I actually started a podcast called Tea Time with Tay, and I thought it was a perfect name for the podcast because I would sit down with a cup of tea and interview someone, because in my home the best conversations happen over a cup of tea. So it just kind of felt like the right thing to do. And when I was seeking a sponsor for my podcast, I reached out to DAVIDsTEA and I never heard back from them. And it was like heart wrenching because I was obsessed with them. I spent thousands of dollars with them every single year and I didn't hear anything back. So instead of getting down about it, I decided, you know, "This is my opportunity to do something for myself." And after about a year and a half of research and work, I launched Cup of Té, Luxury Loose Leaf Teas and we've been in business for... It'll be three years in November.

Chloe: [00:06:28] How did you go from being someone who was aimed at the Olympics and being a nationally ranked athlete, to someone who wanted to go into broadcasting?

Taylor: [00:06:37] I totally attribute that to having great teachers. So I spent 19 months in rehab and when I transitioned back to my high school, I kind of was, I wouldn't say lost, but just had so many different thoughts and now new options for my life, and I just didn't really know how to pinpoint it down. And one of the things I've always known that I like to do is talk. I'm a huge talker and probably to the point of being annoying if you ask the people in my life, but one of my teachers recognized that as being someone who might do well in media. And it just kind of clicked when I heard someone else say it because I am that person who grew up watching a lot

of TV. I am an only child, so that was a really big form of entertainment for me as a child. And I just have always loved TV reporting. I thought I would be an entertainment reporter specifically because I love watching red carpets and the Grammys and the Oscars and all of those things. And it just seemed like a perfect fit. And he had suggested a program called Radio and Television Arts at Ryerson. He had told me it was really hard to get into, so I'd have to work hard in high school to do morning announcements, be a part of student council. By my last year, I was actually Student Council president, so all of these things helped to prepare me for my university journey.

Chloe: [00:08:03] When you went to Ryerson, can you tell me a little bit about that? Was that a good experience? I mean, I think university, sometimes you take a degree and obviously you've not ended up exactly where you thought. I think that happens to many people, but I'm intrigued, as you arrived in a wheelchair. And what was that like to think that you were going to be a reporter? And I'd just like to hear a bit more about that.

Taylor: [00:08:27] It was a little bit daunting, because when you look at reporters online or on TV, I've never seen anybody, at least at the time, in a chair. And so I'm like, "OK, am I going to be the first? Is there room for me? Is there people who are going to want to hire me?" But really quickly, I loved the program so much because I think of the people once again. The people really made it an enjoyable experience for me. The work was so hard, so much harder than I ever thought, but I was really supportive, supported and the campus, for the most part, was fairly accessible. I did have to get my mom, she has always been a champion for me, but she made them make a bathroom wheelchair accessible for me in my building because I had a brand new building that I was a part of. But they didn't have a proper accessible bathroom and she made them install a foyer lift, a pullout bed from the side. So it just really was one of those things that has helped people beyond my years. Yeah, I really did have an enjoyable university experience.

Andrea: [00:09:37] That's really positive to hear that you set things up for future students, so you were a bit of a groundbreaker in the sense of needing accommodations, but now it's there going forward for others. But coming back to the sort of role of your support network in terms of your business. So tell us about your staff and some of your challenges that you might have had in setting up that business and how you handled that.

Taylor: [00:10:05] So not coming from a business background, I had a very large uphill battle to climb for myself because everything I learned was self-taught. I attribute Google and YouTube to really helping me figure things out. Literally typing in, "How to sell tea legally in Canada", "How to source products", "How to manufacture accessories", things like that. Luckily, we live in an information age, but it probably would have come easier if I went to school for business. But beyond that, my family was extremely supportive of the idea. I don't know if anyone really thought I was really going to go through with it until products just kind of started showing up at the house. And I would show up to my typical wine nights with my friends and I'd be like, "Hey, guys, like, do you want to try this tea?" They're like, "Where did this come from?" Like, "I made it!" Or "I sourced it!", and they were just kind of like, "Oh, you're really doing this." And I was really confident in what I was doing. But I think as things came to fruition, people were really excited about the idea. But I think a little bit skeptical at first, which is fine because I mean, who starts a tea company?

Chloe: [00:11:25] What you talk about Googling, I sort of know that when you start up something and you're a novice, I mean the balance between just a regular person starting up a business unknown, they've got, they've found a passion. You've got your podcast over tea, you decide you're going to do tea. What do you think? Do you think your disability helped you in certain ways? Or what role did your disability play in all of this?

Taylor: [00:11:49] I probably would have been able to do things a little quicker if I didn't have a disability only because I think for me, the confidence wasn't there. I wasn't really confident when I went into certain meetings, sometimes with different vendors or wholesalers I wanted to work with because I thought they would judge me. And so I think at first that really held me back. But I think it was more in my head, than actually someone else caring who I was or what my disability was. And I think just like, additionally, having been an athlete has really been beneficial to everything I do. My mindset is a lot different I've come to learn, than perhaps someone who didn't grow up in sports, because I learned at a really young age that if you want results, you got to work really hard. I knew that if I did 100 sit-ups that in like two weeks from now, I'm probably going to have another ab or be stronger. And so when you learn these lessons from a really young age, it just seems like second nature to see a challenge, but then be like, "OK, I can do it. It's just going to take a lot of work."

Chloe: [00:13:02] I mean, I think you're right, sport makes a huge difference in, teaches you a lot psychologically. You said that about your lack of confidence. I mean, I'm really where you're a woman, you're a woman of colour. You're in a wheelchair. There are all these identities that I'm sure would have just like, conflated to make those meetings feel, I think, heavier in some way. And do you think, I mean, you were a woman of colour beforehand and then adding disability. What do you think that that mix does for you?

Taylor: [00:13:32] I think it surprises people more often than not. I always say I'm not the typical blueprint of what you think of when you think of a business owner. When you think of an entrepreneur, the first thought that so many people have is like a white, heterosexual male. Then the next thing was like a white female. And then if it's not that you hear Black owned businesses or BIPOC owned businesses, but you don't often hear BIPOC owned businesses that are run by someone with a disability. Like it's just the last... It's at the very bottom of the list of expectations. And so to be going into an industry that is so old, tea is one of the oldest industries in the entire world. You know, you have Twinings, you have Tetley, you have Lipton, DAVIDsTEA, which is so dominant, especially here in Canada. So to enter into a market like that while also being BIPOC owned, female owned, and disability owned it, it really shakes up people. But I'm happy to be a little bit of a disturber. I don't mind.

Chloe: [00:14:38] Do you think it makes it better? Do you feel like you're more noticeable? People will remember you if they actually get to meet you?

Taylor: [00:14:45] I think I definitely think I'm more memorable. I think a lot of, I had to really think about in terms of branding what I wanted to do. Did I want to just have a brand and let it exist in the world? Or did I want to attach myself to the brand? And now I recognize that my story, along with the brand is actually imperative to the brand's success. And I know that if there ever is an opportunity for me to have an investor or sell or something like that, it would be extremely important that I still be a part of the company because of that. And not a lot of entrepreneurs like to do that. But I'm OK with doing that because I'm hoping that through my business, I am able to provide an example for other people who come after me, that you can look like me, be like me, and still be able to have a company like the one I'm building.

Chloe: [00:15:37] So how did you know that? Like, how did you know that it mattered that your identity was tied to it? Was there an example where you realized you were going to a wholesaler and it made a difference?

Taylor: [00:15:47] I think I knew that because I grew up in a sport of gymnastics where, I know now when you think of gymnastics, you think of Simone Biles, you think of Gabby Douglas, you think of these really incredible athletes. But 13 years ago, I was the only Black girl in my entire gym club. I didn't when my coaches would talk about because, you know, Black bodies are a little bit different in the sport, we tend to be a little bit more powerful. We have just different muscle mass makeup and whatever. And so, when my coaches would try to explain to me who I would resemble, they would talk about, "Oh, Daiane dos Santos from Brazil" or this person from this other part of the world, but no one who was in my own country. And so when you grow up feeling a little bit different it, you know, it makes you feel like I see the importance now in representation, because I look at the sport that I used to love and see how these amazing Black athletes are dominating and I'm like, "If I had that as a child, I'm like, I want to get back into the sport now", and obviously I can't. But I feel like more excited and inspired to watch it because they are these examples. So when I'm thinking of myself in business, I'm like, "Maybe if I am that example for someone, then they'll be excited to want to try too." So it didn't necessarily have to do with my conversations with vendors, but just through my own life experiences and where I hope to leave an impact.

Andrea: [00:17:15] I'm wondering about your social media, you're a social media guru, and you've talked about that being a real asset for you. Tell us about how you use social media as a person with a disability who might also be able to use that as a bit of a platform, but also for your business.

Taylor: [00:17:34] Before I had my business, I had done a little bit of micro influencing on my own personal page, as well as I have a poetry page that has, like, I think, twenty six thousand followers. So I had a little bit of experience with growing Instagram accounts and the power of social media and how that works and what tends to trend and what doesn't. I think also being a millennial it's kind of ingrained into us on how to do these things. I think each generation becomes a little bit more attached to the hip with their phone and social media, so I think I definitely worked in my favour. So when I started the brand, I knew that in order for it to grow

and the awareness to be where I needed it to be, I had to create products that were really photo friendly. Create things around the brand that were very easily shareable. For instance, I call our family 'The Happy Steeper Family', and I want people to feel as though that they're part of our decisions. Sometimes when I'm about to create a new product, I'll put pictures up and I'll be like, "Hey, do you like this colour or this colour? What tea flavours do you want to see next?" And really get and create a community, because we don't necessarily need to have a million followers to make a million dollars? You could have two hundred followers, but if they are excited about the brand, then you'll be able to create your own community in your own lane and do really well. And I think we've been able to do that quite successfully.

Chloe: [00:19:02] You were recognized by Oprah through your social media. How did that happen?

Taylor: [00:19:07] Honestly, to this day, I still don't know. It's so trippy to me. It happened because they found me online and they fell in love, like I said with our Instagram. They said the products look great and then they just wanted to try. So we sent one of everything. The email came with a very simple email, but I know the story goes, but many people know now, but actually deleted the email because I thought it was fake. And then decided to take it out of the trash when I couldn't get my mind off of it. And it ended up being very real. And so they found me online. I sent the products, the team loved it and after a few weeks we were sending it to Gayle King and Oprah's home. So it was an extremely surreal experience, and to have her stamp of approval has opened up so many doors for us in terms of getting into Indigo and we're on Hudson's Bay marketplace and speaking engagements, the growth of my business, awareness of my business. It's just, it's like winning a Nobel Peace Prize, it's like life changing.

Chloe: [00:20:21] So it's really boomed your business.

Taylor: [00:20:23] It has, yeah. It's given me the opportunity to do so many things I never thought. One of those big things being, I'm opening up a store in the fall, so I never thought we'd be in a position to be able to do so before The Oprah Effect.

Andrea: [00:20:39] That's a good way of putting it, The Oprah Effect. I'm sure she'd like that term as well.

Taylor: [00:20:44] Yeah, it's very, it's very real.

Andrea: [00:20:48] So with your social media abilities and your business success, you're also involved in some committee work and you must be incredibly busy. How is that work again, another something that you're creating or contributing to? Tell us a little bit about that sort of work you're doing on behalf of the disability community.

Taylor: [00:21:13] You know, one of the things I'd never do is really stop. I don't know what I'm running away from, but I am currently a part of three incredible, different opportunities. I'm on the Premier's Council on Equality of Opportunity. I'm on the Accessibility Standards Advisory Council for Ontario, and I was recently appointed to the board for the Spinal Cord Injury Ontario. So I have decided to volunteer for all of these things for different reasons. I realize how lucky I am to have even a little bit of a platform. And so the responsibility I feel to raise awareness and also get involved to know what's happening in terms of policy is extremely important to me. I was really supported by my community when I was going through everything. So this is my... I feel like you don't always have to like through funds, necessarily. That's not the only way of being involved. You can just be a part of a change in so many different ways, and I think that this is my opportunity and opportunities to do so. It definitely keeps me busy, but it's been a really great experience. And also I've been meeting incredible people through it. Like I've gotten really close with the CEO of Big Brothers Big Sisters because she's on the Premier's Council. So it's a great networking opportunity. It's an opportunity to give back to the community and hopefully influence real change.

Chloe: [00:22:43] You also, part of your proceeds go towards mental health, so I'd like to know how that works in for you with your physical disability and why you chose to do that.

Taylor: [00:22:52] I knew when I started my business that there had to be a social cause. I think social causes are extremely important and something that a lot of people actually seek out in terms of the business aspect. It's something people seek out when you are looking to shop these days. You want to think that your dollar is going to something more than just consumerism. And so I knew that was important, but I had to really think to myself, what cause would be the most important to me, and the obvious choice would have been a spinal cord

injury awareness. And the reason why I didn't do that is because I wanted to choose something that affected and was relatable to a wider range of people. So mental health causes and mental health issues affect one in four people, whether that be directly or indirectly through a family member or friend. And I think the conversation around mental health is so stigmatized. Even still, it's definitely gotten a lot better. The hardest part of my journey after my accident was actually the mental health struggles, rather than the physical struggles. And it wasn't something I felt comfortable talking about because of, not because I don't have amazing family and friends, but because it's just not the culture I was grown up in. And anything I can do to change that is important. I think that some of the organizations we support, like CAMH, have done a really, really, really great job of implementing change. In terms of spinal cord injury, I hope to one day have actually my own organization, so I definitely will be able to specifically hone in on that. But I think I want to do it in a little bit of a bigger way, with me being a little bit more involved in the organization itself.

Andrea: [00:24:40] I'm interested in your any personal hacks you might have in terms of how you do things, any accommodations that you found have helped you. You're probably working a lot from your desk. Just those kind of things. Is there anything that you really swear by or that has helped you that you could pass on to others?

Taylor: [00:25:03] I probably have a very unhealthy relationship with my laptop. We're attached at the hip, as well as my phone. I don't have children, so I like to think of them as my children. So if you have an unhealthy relationship with your love for your children, that's kind of what I do with my computer devices because it keeps me connected. I'm constantly working all hours of the day. The great thing that I like in terms of working around my disability is I do have quite set hours for certain things like nursing or when my nurses are available. Because I have my own business, I'm able to create my own schedule. So most people work 9:00 to 5:00. I might work one to 10 or you'll find me up at two o'clock in the morning because I that's genuinely what I like to work. So I do have a flexibility in terms of that and working around my disability. My nurses and my business but, especially now with me opening a store, I know that a lot of things are going to be changing. I have to be a little bit more used to the typical work hours, but I think having my accessibility needs met with my laptop and really, I use my phone with Siri to type a lot of things, and it really easily transfers over to my laptop, which makes getting through my emails extremely quick and painless. And I actually don't sit at a desk. I have this wooden

board actually, that's cut out perfectly in the shape around my stomach area and my armrest to plop my laptop on. So it's at a comfortable height for me for typing.

Chloe: [00:26:48] Do you use hardware or software hacks for that? Because your hand use is limited. Do you type with just the edge of your hand? I assume you have predictive sort of software when you're typing and things like that.

Taylor: [00:26:58] So I used to wear hand splints on both of my hands and put erasers, or pencils with erasers in and type like this. That's how I did it when I came out of physio. Over the years, I just kind of.. My, so this hand I can actually flex my wrist. The other one, I actually can't. So I've just gotten really fast at typing. I'm extremely fast typing, using the corner of my pinky on my phone. So I use the part of my pinky on my phone. And so all of my, even at university, all of my essays were written on my phone and then just copy and pasted onto Word or whatever I was doing. I actually typed faster than most of my friends do. So I got quite good.

Chloe: [00:27:44] So I've got a quick question. I mean, you talk about your nursing care. A lot of people with disabilities are dependent on either government programs or on an insurance settlement. I use actually a government program on which I get to hire my own individuals. But I'm wondering, how do you do it? Because this is often a big deal for people who need to get out in the workplace or build a business.

Taylor: [00:28:06] I have a combination of a little bit of out of pocket paying for my own individual people as well as my mom's insurance. My mom worked for the city for twenty five years, so she was actually when she left the city, she was grandfathered into an incredible insurance plan that is not, I believe, readily available nowadays. She actually had the option to continue working for a few more years and lose a lot of that and a lot of the things that came with her insurance or stop several years early, take a little bit less of a pension, but get the full benefits. So that's what she decided to do. So she actually got penalized with her pension in order to have better health care for me. So she... She really came through.

Chloe: [00:28:58] So in a sense, you got really kind of, not lucky, but you're fortunate.

Taylor: [00:29:03] Very, very much so. That's why... That's why I, it's so hard because I know that so many people, that is a huge barrier for them. And don't get me wrong, there's still a lot I pay for myself. But, you know, if you have great insurance, it goes a really long way.

Chloe: [00:29:23] I'm glad you say it because I'm not sure many people who are able bodied will understand that barrier and I think in Canada in particular, we all presume because acute health care is provided for through our taxes, that when you become disabled that they sort of presume that that continues if you are hurt and you have prolonged illness or disability. And in fact, that stops and does become a barrier. So the fact that you found you have a, you know, a solution, I think does matter, and I think it's really important for our people to know that, right?

Taylor: [00:29:58] I tell people that all the time, because they don't think a lot of people think about these things, you know, you're like, "Oh yeah, I have insurance," but like, how far will that really take you if you really needed to use it? And I think if anyone who is able bodied or not able bodied should really take that into account in seeking out employment, because that could be a huge difference. It doesn't really matter. You might want to take a job that's five thousand dollars less a year. If you have a job that will provide you and have you for that rainy day, because we all will experience it. We all are going to get sick at some point or deal with something where you need time off or you need to see a doctor. You know what I mean? It's going to happen. Anyone who thinks it's not going to happen, I don't know what parallel universe you're living in, but we are human and we are not here permanently.

Chloe: [00:30:46] And we're fragile, right? And things happen. So my big burning question out of that is you've chosen a route that doesn't give you a plan, right? So you've chosen most people would have said to me or said to you, you know, "Taylor, get a job that has a good plan, you know, just stick to it, it may be boring, but you'll be safe," right? Because you have a disability. Why didn't you go off and go into a media company with its set benefits?

Taylor: [00:31:15] It's because I'm banking on myself. I really am. I'm a strong believer that this path for me will be able to provide me with everything I've wanted and more. My main goal is to create generational, be the first person in my family to create generational wealth. I've seen a lot of other families that I grew up around because there's a lot of very wealthy families in gymnastics, it's one of those sports that tends to be expensive, wasn't my family at all. But

seeing that as an example, I was like, "I need to create that for myself," and I knew that starting a business would be the only way, and if I need to be the first person in my family to take that massive risk and go out into the ship, the waters like I am willing to do it for the betterment of everyone who comes after me.

Andrea: [00:32:10] I love to hear how you're sort of groundbreaking in a lot of different areas. Another practical consideration is, like Chloe was mentioning, if you have a company that you're working for, they're responsible for your accommodations or they will sometimes provide your accommodations, depending on your agreement or your insurance or whatever. So I'm just curious about that desk of yours. Was that something you sourced yourself? Was that an OT that suggested it for you? Or maybe someone built it for you? I don't know. I'm curious.

Taylor: [00:32:44] When I was in Bloorview Kids Rehab, they had made me a board through OT that was, it was fitted more for my other, my old wheelchair. And so I've just kind of been still using it for the last few years. Funny enough, three weeks ago, my friend, who has a father who has a farm out in Mitchell, she was like, "Girl, this board isn't working for you anymore." And she actually traced my board, took it up to Mitchell and her dad, who owns a farm and a wood chopping facility he actually made it for me, but I... And so that's what I'm using now, and it's perfect. It's so great. But I have the blueprint of it and the idea for it because of an OT. I think anybody who has the opportunity to try to make their life a little bit easier, OT's are absolutely incredible with that. They're so creative and inventive. I never thought before my wrist was strong enough that I would be able to type with erasers, but it got me through the majority of high school. And so they really do think outside of the box and make this board. If anyone knows me, I travel with this board literally everywhere. I eat off this board, I go to restaurants and bars. Speaking engagements, like this board really helps me out in so many different ways.

Andrea: [00:34:06] Yeah, my mum has a similar thing, so my mom's in a wheelchair as well, and so it slides onto her wheelchair, it sounds like it's not as big as yours is because it doesn't, yeah, doesn't give her enough room to be on a computer, necessarily. But I'm I think it's also, we need to give credit to people with disabilities who... Like all the people that we've interviewed, we've heard of some kind of personal hack, and people with disabilities are maybe naturally entrepreneurial in the sense that they're trying to create or they have the lived experience to

know what might make their lives a little bit easier. And so we see these modifications and we see these new inventions coming out of the disability community all the time.

Taylor: [00:34:57] Absolutely. I am constantly in awe of the hacks that some of my friends do. Like it's just so amazing, all of the little hacks people have and I'm constantly learning and people are getting more inventive because we're all just trying to make life a lot easier.

Chloe: [00:35:14] Well, on that basis, what do you... I mean, I'm going to, I'm probing a bit because I'm intrigued by this because these have been barriers to me at different times, is what about transportation for you? I found public para-trans really tiring, really difficult to use, booking well in advance. It was late and if you were late, you were left behind, like it just was hugely problematic. And if I hadn't gotten my own sort of hand-controlled car, I wouldn't have completed my degree. I just wouldn't be where I am without that. So I'm intrigued how you've coped.

Taylor: [00:35:47] When I was in high school, I would use Wheel-Trans to transport me to physiotherapy. And just how many times have you been left or gone on a three-hour route to something which would have taken maybe half an hour or booking in advance? But I'm a young person, so if I want to go here and want to switch my plans and go there, I can't do that because I haven't booked it ahead of time. So throughout my high school experience, I was like, "This is not working for me." Luckily, I was able to get a wheelchair van, which my mom would drive. I know that I could potentially learn how to drive. I've seen people with less movement than me drive, but I'm terrified of hurting other people, so I'm just happy being a passenger. So I had a van for quite a few years and a couple of years ago I got a converted Ford Explorer, which is like my baby, my other baby, and I love it because I get to sit in the front. I actually have something under the wheelchair that drops like it's like a mechanism where I drive over it in the car, it locks me into the front, and I just think it's great because I think I always thought I'd have to use a van, but I don't. I have a Ford Explorer that I absolutely love, and it's my main means of transportation. Otherwise, UberWAV has gotten a lot better in Toronto, and pre-pandemic, you would find me in an Uber many times a week going out to hang out with my friends.

Andrea: [00:37:18] You were actually at a job where that you had to travel to previously, and so was that... Would you get rides to work from your mum in the van at that time? Or was that combination? I guess it was previous to Uber, maybe that you were working in more of a workplace?

Taylor: [00:37:37] Yeah, I interned. I had three internships where I worked at Global News, Entertainment Tonight Canada and the Canadian Olympic Committee, and all three of those were throughout my university experience. So I did have my van at that time, thankfully. Otherwise, I probably would not have shown up at work on time, probably ever.

Andrea: [00:37:57] You make a really important point for people with disabilities in the workforce and for everyone, really, because during the pandemic, many people realized how nice it was to not have that daily commute, saving them time and money and energy. But the commute might demand a lot more energy from someone with a disability. And we are finding in our study that having reliable transportation is a key element of being able to work outside the home. And so one possible positive outcome of the last year and a half is the realization on the part of employers that it is possible to accommodate more people who need to or prefer to work from home. So Taylor, do you think the pandemic has changed our collective attitude to remote work and how this might benefit people with disabilities in the workforce?

Taylor: [00:38:45] I think that the pandemic has shown us, like you said, that so many people can do a lot of their work at home, and I think it's going to inspire a lot of people with disabilities who might not have wanted to enter the workforce to, or employers who might have had a bias against people who spend a lot of time at home, to be open to hiring more people with disabilities. Because we, if we are set up in our home environment with all of our accommodations that are already here, we're able to do the work. If you have a lot of accommodations that you can't set up in a workplace, this provides you the opportunity to do it from home and be able to create a living for yourself. And I think it's going to really help. In terms of me, like, I've even seen opportunities where I've been asked to do speaking engagements in the past, but they would be like three hours out of town. And I don't know if I can do that with working with my schedule, with my nursing, but being able to do speaking engagements through Zoom and still be able to touch people and have that same effect has

actually really expanded my speaking when I thought that I would not get hired to do anything for the last year and a half, but I've been busier than ever.

Chloe: [00:39:54] So one of the things I've... I mean, I've been thinking, really, I'm someone who needs that accommodation, that flexibility of not always being at work, and it's been denied to me in the past, and I'm really hoping the pandemic has changed that. But one of the things, the subtle things I've heard from and I've actually talked to somebody who is responsible for diversity, employment opportunities in a large, large IT firm. And I've heard this actually from other disabled people that, you know, with remote working, then workplaces don't have to be made accessible. They don't have to go to the bother of doing it, but you still can get employed. And I do see the advantage of that. But I also sort of cringe and think, "No, I want the world more accessible, I want everywhere to be more accessible," because I think what Andrea said and what you commented on is that when the world is changed a bit or universally designed, it's not just for disabilities. Everybody ends up benefiting a great deal. I was wondering, you know, in your experience just to comment on that and also what you did, those internships, what were the best accessibility features in those jobs and what were the worst?

Taylor: [00:40:59] Yeah, like you said it is a bit of a double-edged sword when you want people to stay home and work, but then you also want to make sure that they're following through with making sure we're accessible. If we want to turn around and work in the workplace, I don't have the answers for that. Which one would be better? But in terms of my experiences, genuinely, I think because I was working at such massive organizations like Global News and Entertainment Tonight Canada, like, it's not their first rodeo. They've been around a long time and they're owned by Bell Media or Rogers. I forget, one of those two. And so they were very accessible in terms of getting around. They did have one really bad service elevator that wasn't a fan of, but I'll give them... I'll give them a pass on that because it was functional, but they were really accommodating to me and specifically, and they were specifically accommodating because I actually got that internship through a program that they do where they specifically seek out to hire people with disabilities for their summer internships. So that was a really big, main focus of them. And that's why I enjoyed my time there so much, because I really felt like they went above and beyond to make sure I had everything I needed to succeed while not feeling isolated in a work environment. So that was really welcoming. The Canadian Olympic Committee was also in a great building. It was very accessible and they allowed me to bring in

my own aide to help me throughout the day, they were really understanding. I remember I had one day where I had like a little bit of bathroom issues and I actually had to like, be like, "I need to go home." And they were extremely understanding. So I got really, I think I got really lucky.

Chloe: [00:42:52] What about as an entrepreneur when you're... Do you do most stuff remotely or do you have to go out and meet people? And are their businesses accessible, like warehouses? Do you have to go to warehouses and look at stuff that you're importing in? Or do you get somebody else to do that work for you? Or did you? I'm sure maybe you get other people to do it now that you're getting bigger?

Taylor: [00:43:09] Yeah, I've definitely had people pick up stuff for me. I do a lot of my work through Zoom actually, meetings through Zoom, sometimes even looking at certain products through Zoom. I think the store is going to be a really great opportunity to have more of those in-person meetings. And I think that's going to open up a lot of opportunities. But beyond that, it's actually been quite easy to switch from pre-pandemic to pandemic mode and continue to work quite seamlessly, actually.

Andrea: [00:43:45] So seeing as we're kind of talking about the pandemic and possibly whether things will improve, what other things do you think, positive or negative, will be in store for people with disabilities in the future? Being on these different committees, you must have some insights potentially about some changes that the government might be making or things that are being talked about in your circles.

Taylor: [00:44:07] I think you're going to see us be certainly a lot more involved in the decision making. So often like things are done to us, not necessarily for us. We're not a part of the conversation of what we actually need. And I think that's going to start changing. Also with people just being more comfortable acknowledging the fact that whether it's physical or mental, that so many of us live with a disability. And I think when you are more open to those conversations and people feel more comfortable speaking up for what's right, their rights and what change needs to happen. So I think we're in a time where there is no better time for change, and I think it's only going to get better, genuinely better from here. One of the things that's being talked about is I know that there is like a certain cap for how much people can make in order to qualify for certain programs or nursing and things like that. So that's a big

discussion we're having because we feel like it almost encourages people to not want to work, because why would you work to lose some of your benefits? You know what I mean? It makes absolutely no sense. And it's a real big struggle because you have people who want to get involved and work but don't want to be penalized for making a living wage like any other person, would. It seems so backwards and something we're trying to work on.

Chloe: [00:45:29] I mean, I think the trap that you talk about that your committee is, you say you're working on, that there are so many disabled individuals who volunteer who then can't be paid, you know, even a nominal sum, and they're already living in sort of a realm of poverty. They're allowed there a certain amount of resources, but they're not allowed anything more. And I don't think most of the population knows how sort of punitive that is, that model. And you know, I'm really grateful for people like you who are going to committees and doing it. But part of me thinks, "Well, you know, this is the type of work that disabled people really can do," is use their minds and contribute and use their voices to influence things. And yet they can't get paid for them and they can't really get public acknowledgement for them. I don't know how you feel about that sort of double bind people are in when they're doing the work you're doing.

Taylor: [00:46:19] Yeah. On the accessibility council, we do get paid very little, very little, but nominally for someone that could even so much put them over the edge and it just... It's really disheartening, and I know that they mean well, but I think specifically with this year's council, they have really had a wide range of people, so someone with a disability who is Native or somebody who has lived on a reserve. Things like that, I think, are going to help bring a broader picture to how these small changes, how much they can affect somebody in their entire life beyond even like the spinal cord board I'm on, I'm the first female of colour who is on the board, and I think they even recognize in the first meeting, "We have done a horrible job of diversity and listening to other people's experiences and stories." Like how could it have been around for this long and like the majority of their board is white men, and that's not representative of the city and people they're trying to serve. So often, people who do need all of these help, are actually people of colour or who are in disenfranchised opportunities. So you're helping people, but not talking to the people you're trying to help. That just seems very backwards.

Chloe: [00:47:51] It really is true that disabled, you know, communities in this country seem to be generally populated by white people. And I think in part because they're used to the sort of administrative angles to get things established and do stuff like that. But it doesn't excuse not getting a representative body because you're exactly right. You cannot know what somebody of colour or somebody is on a reserve or someone who's a new immigrant, what their needs are compared to somebody who's been injured, who's male, who may have come from a family, who's been here for several generations and has different types of resources and knowledge of the community. So, you know, the fact that you're doing this work is incredibly important. That leads me to sort of a question is, I mean, you've had some experience now you're sort of a young burgeoning entrepreneur, right? So you have some experience to offer some advice. So if you were to take over the government for a bit and make changes to make the world better for someone like you, going either into the workplace or a young entrepreneur who has a disability, what would you change? What would you sort of say needs to happen?

Taylor: [00:49:04] Well, so much. Where do I even start? I think the basics is keeping the workplaces accessible, truly accessible. That doesn't mean just having a button on a door. It also means making sure that they have access to a caregiver who might need to be with them all day, making sure that all spaces within the office are accessible, having an accessible washroom, but not having an accessible desk that's the right height. All of these things that they don't really think about are so important. So that would be one of many. Also making sure transportation is more accessible. We have so many stops in our subway that are not accessible. So if you worked at that particular stop, how are you getting there? Transportation is a huge barrier. Beyond that, just education from the people who actually are going through it. Like I said, so often decisions are made for us without us being consulted.

Andrea: [00:50:10] I really feel that's what we're seeing happening now is there's more realisation, like before previous generations maybe didn't have that awareness that it is better to ask someone who's living through it than to assume we know what's best and whether it comes to diversity and inclusion efforts in the workplace, which sadly still people with disabilities are still not always even accounted for in those disability and inclusion efforts, because they are not in the workplace to say, "Hey, what about us? We need to be in that policy," or "We need to be acknowledged and hired as part of your inclusion efforts." So but

we're talking about it, it is changing, and it's an exciting place to be kind of in the midst of this change.

Chloe: [00:51:03] I mean, one of the things that I noticed in our conversation, Taylor, is what a big role your family has played and your private networks, and that you said you didn't involve yet, you know you had your rehab that was sort of, that was government provided, but largely it seems that you've had a very strong sort of drive yourself and your family has. What do you think... And even when you were, you know, when you went to school, your mom was an HR specialist, she knew what was required by law. She got it done. Not many people would have had that. What do you think... It just makes me really aware that if you don't have those private things, then you're really kind of, you're in trouble a bit. And do you think there's a better solution than what we've got now?

Taylor: [00:51:47] Yeah, it's a, it's kind of scary. I know that there's so many things. I got injured really young, so I was only 14 and a teenager. So I don't know anything about life at all, like I was a child, I didn't know what I was doing. And so luckily I had a parental figure who was really great at navigating all of these governmental issues and things, but I think I often think about someone who might have... My mom is an immigrant parent, but maybe a newly immigrated parent who may not speak the language as much and what those conversations look like. And sometimes you have to yell and scream before anything is done. My mom definitely had to do that. But if you don't have someone who is able to advocate for you, what does that look like? In the accessibility council what I've been bringing up, is like telling people that on each of these places, so universities, workforces, they need to have someone who is specifically hired and their job is to be a disability advocate. And the rate of disability is only going to go up and the disability advocate would be and do, would be the facilitator between the employee and the employer to make sure that all of their needs are being met, and that they are aware of the access and things that they can do and not someone who's in government who they can go online and reach out to and like Google and find like no, implemented into the system. As like just as someone who's as important as HR or someone who's important as the finance department, they need someone who is like the advocacy department.

Andrea: [00:53:25] Yeah. And when you do have an expert in that role, you're able to optimize things right. You're able to make it easier and cut out the red tape or the begging and pleading

that might be required for you to get some sort of change or accommodation. So it just sort of makes sense for large organizations for sure, like universities or corporations. And then in terms of like smaller organizations who might not be able to afford a single person for that role, I don't know. Do you have any suggestions as to how those kind of employers might become more accommodating or open or understanding of employees with disabilities?

Taylor: [00:54:10] Perhaps having some kind of training of disability and inclusion training, when you're starting a business being mandatory? I know for me, like when I start my business, I have to take courses for like food handling and things like that. Why not have to take a course on disability inclusion and what that looks like? Having a checklist of things to make sure that your store or your, like for me right now, I'm designing my store. I'm making sure it's all accessible, even things I didn't even think about, like I don't personally, when I go to a washroom in a public setting, use handrails because I don't use the washroom that way. But when I was talking with my designer, he was like, "Oh yeah, you need to have the handrail. This is the height." And he knew these things because it was an important imperative to his work and his training. And I'm like, "Oh, I, if I was setting up the store that maybe was pre-existing, I wouldn't even think about these changes." And so making sure that people have that training and or awareness would be really great.

Chloe: [00:55:13] Everybody has things that they need to deal with as they go to work. And if we can somehow make our, and maybe the pandemic has taught us that, that that we can make those accommodations for everybody and still have a great deal of productivity and success. Thank you for giving up your time. I know your time is money and you've got to run your business, so we really appreciate it.

Taylor: [00:55:35] My pleasure. My pleasure.

Chloe: [00:55:42] Thank you for listening. We hope you've enjoyed Broadcastability. You can find us on the web at theproudproject.ca and broadcastability.ca. You can also find us on social media at the Proud Project on LinkedIn, Facebook, and YouTube. And we're the proudprojectca on Instagram.

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