Transcript Episode 3: A Conversation with Alexis Chicoine

## Alexis: [00:00:00]

It is a sales feature now for me… the good, the bad, the ugly that has come to my life and I strive to move forward and keep on learning.

[music]

## Andrea: [00:00:17]

Welcome to 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 Proud Project on our website, [theproudproject.ca](https://www.theproudproject.ca/).

[music]

## Chloe: [00:00:38]

This podcast was recorded and produced on the traditional and ancestral territories of the Huron-Wendat, the Seneca and the Mississaugas 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.

[music]

## Chloe: [00:01:03]

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 and Whiteley and I have worked together for a number of years.

## Andrea: [00:01:16]

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: [00:01:35]

I'm really looking forward to - for people to hear what we've been doing and to hear from disabled people who are so successful in the workplace themselves.

## Andrea: [00:01:43]

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.

[music]

## Andrea: [00:02:07]

This podcast interview is with Alexis Chicoine, who is an experienced administrative manager, a motivational speaker and disability consultant.

## Chloe: [00:02:16]

I'm actually really excited by this conversation because she's just such a delightful person, but she has such strength of character, I think, too.

## Andrea: [00:02:25]

Yes, she's extremely positive, and it's no wonder she's a motivational speaker. She has that experience, but I really loved how she was talking about skillset, that she focuses on what her skills are when she goes to an interview rather than her disability. You know, something might look like it's a disadvantage. You have to really change the conversation to what your advantages are.

## Chloe: [00:02:54]

I really, really liked her clear understanding of the workplace. She's had such diverse experience that she really understands in different modalities what accessibility is, like what inclusion is. She's experienced it. She knows when it's happening and when it's not happening. And it's not necessarily about whether it's in a big, physically accessible building. It's really about the nature of people's attitudes and the culture in the workplace.

## Andrea: [00:03:21]

Yes, that really stood out for me, too, is her discussion around what an inclusive culture looks like. I think one of the things she has to share with employers is how to create that culture.

## Chloe: [00:03:34]

And I think that she makes it less scary. She seems to appreciate the world around her so much that she makes it easy to come into her world.

[music]

## Alexis: [00:03:49]

Well I am a B.C. girl, and one of the few, it seems, live out here in Vancouver. Born and bred and absolutely love it. Traveled quite a few destinations around the world and also have a degree out of UBC. I was living a full life. I was married when a slight car accident on one of my trips kind of changed my life. I was 30 years old and traveling in Venezuela in the middle of nowhere, on what was going to be an awesome four-day trek to fish for Piranha and hang on to some anaconda and sleep in hammocks and do some crazy things, when the first day the driver (we were in sort of what you would consider like a mountain road) missed a corner and drove off the mountainside. I became a C6-7 quadriplegic at that moment. And yeah, that was, you know, living a full life until the age of 30 and then had to recreate myself and figure things out. And the most amazing thing with travel insurance is - one don't ever leave home without it, even on your day trip to the U.S. - I did not get any bills. Nothing. And well, the only bill we received was our ambulance ride, which is from our airport to VGH [Vancouver General Hospital] because our BC Med doesn't cover it.

## Alexis: [00:05:18]

Pre-accident, my main job, I was working at a coffee house. My dad, I was living in northern B.C. in Terrace. My dad wanted to always have a business and since I had arrived up there after university, we did it together and he bought it, I ran it and we worked together and I was always with the employees. I was always having bad cop and he was a good cop, you know, happy go lucky manager who walks in the door and I'm like, “Dad!” So when I had, you know, the car accident and needed to recreate myself, I now… the only main job, pre-waitressing positions and doing other things through university, my main reference was my father. So you can't really do that even though I was managing a restaurant, basically. Not so great to start off, but that's the only serious employer to talk to.

## Chloe: [00:06:22]

What did you have your degree in? I mean that, you know, I'm sort of thinking about your resume, your degree and dad, as dad, as referee, and “by the way, I'm disabled!”

## Alexis: [00:06:30]

Yeah. Nutritional Sciences. So biochem of the human body basically is what I took. Yeah, I didn't know about dietetics until I got into school, and I would have gone in that direction. I really believe in finding something out of schooling that's employable. I don't want to do four years… I don't regret having a degree, I just want to have one that gets you a job at the end of it. And a standard science degree doesn't really normally do that. And you have to continue. I had chosen to go back to university after a four-year break already. So I was like, “Oh, dietetics, let's do that, awesome, employable after four years!” But oddly enough, in those days it was a different faculty at UBC and I tried. You couldn't switch faculties. It was a nightmare. So nutritional sciences, yeah, BSc basic came out. So I would say that… I mean, it didn't direct into a position per say, but it has always helped me step up at any job interview. And they were never related to my degree, ever. Later on as my adult years continued, but showing that you were self-directed and focused and able to do all these things gave me a step up over other people.

## Alexis: [00:08:12]

So I honestly wouldn't be where I am today without a couple of amazing donations [laughs] that were separate. A friend of a friend brought this fellow into my life and wanted to help me, and I couldn't have gone to play sport where it was located. I couldn't have tried to find or go to the workplace. I would have needed much more accommodation around things like that. He bought me a van. Straight out. About probably six months after my ex left. This came into my life, and he just wanted to help. I understand he had some difficult background himself, and he's starting to sort of turn his life around and luckily had made a ton of money and wanted to help where people didn't help him and outright bought me a thirty-thousand-dollar van with a ramp and the whole bit. Like, amazing. Having the you know, transportation is huge for people with disabilities getting to places keeping warm. So having that van in my back pocket changed my direction.

## Chloe: [00:09:24]

I think you're right. Transportation makes such a huge difference at all levels. You talk about going home, it seems to me in some ways you were lucky there and how that worked out as well, because you… so can you tell us a little bit about that?

## Alexis: [00:09:38]

Yeah. So friends and family took it upon themselves to raise a bunch of money. They had a huge garage sale up back in Terrace. By this point, I was down in Vancouver, you know, rehab. I actually never did return to Terrace after the accident. It just didn't make sense to go back to a smaller community. Metro Van has so much going on that we decided to stay. My ex was also from North Van, so and my mom and sister, funny enough, ended up in North Vancouver. So North Vancouver, it was going to be. But the friends and family that were up in Terrace, they raised twenty thousand dollars. And then I know that their friends and family down in Metro Van put some money together as a donation as well. And we got to use it as a down payment for an apartment in North Vancouver. And in the day, of 2000, it was before real estate went crazy. So it was an 800 square foot, one bedroom apartment that we got for one hundred and two thousand. So that was an amazing opportunity.

## Andrea: [00:10:48]

A gift, yeah.

## Alexis: [00:10:49]

But because, at the time of the accident, to ease financial burdens, because both of us, my ex and I had just finished university, we had all these student loans and things, we actually had to file for bankruptcy. It was just what we had to do at the time to wave a bunch of stuff, which sounds bad, but it meant that the apartment had to go into my in-laws name. But then, as I say, we got divorced, but it's in my ex-in-laws name now. The in-laws were amazing. They could have by that point, a couple of years later, sold the apartment for quite a bit more because by that stage, real estate started to increase. But all they asked me to do was, now that the funds that had been raised were starting to dwindle and they were paying out of pocket for mortgage, they said that if I could take over the mortgage, then the place was mine. By that point, I'd been working already for a couple of years, and luckily, I've convinced [laughs] I don't know how I did mean that I said we had to file for bankruptcy, which obviously has a huge effect for usually at least seven years on your financial statements. But a credit union came through and heard my story and saw my capabilities from before and now. And I got a mortgage and I got to take over the apartment. But I mean, again, scary as hell, because it's now my home and I'm responsible for everything and the strate fee, and I'm proud as hell that I was able to maintain it.

## Chloe: [00:12:40]

That's just a good story, and I think what it speaks to is all sorts of things. You were lucky, but also there happened to be an apartment. I mean, I think many Canadian cities just aren't constructed that way. You get apartments that are walk ups, that the rooms are way too small for wheelchairs to even, like you can't put furniture in if you're going to navigate it with a wheelchair. There are all sorts of things that you know…

## Alexis: [00:13:03]

The key is older buildings,

## Chloe: [00:13:05]

Older buildings that have big rooms, but hopefully that have good elevator access. You know, they don't always do, and…

## Alexis: [00:13:12]

Oh, it broke down, don't get me wrong, like, we'd been viewing a couple of apartments up until then. And by that point, I was crying because they were just these awful normal apartments with short little balconies that had the six-inch step to get up and over. I was never going to be able to get outside to the to the outside area. And to me, just being outside was so important that just, again, fed my spirit to have fresh air and feel some on my face. Even in accessible living, there's a balcony that you can only stare at because they didn't think about the, you know, zero threshold access. Been in this one particular place that we walked into for the viewing. I could just see it. It was such an amazing ground level apartment, huge outside deck patio. Yes, it had the big lip to it. But my ex-father-in-law and family were very handy and without asking strata (shhh!), we lowered the patio door, which was common property to as the level of outside, which still allowed for a three-inch step up from the inside. And we just ramped it. We ramped it from the inside. And yeah.

## Andrea: [00:14:40]

Just going back to that idea of having energy and you told us previously about the different sports that you've played and to me, that's kind of a theme and quite a few people we speak with is that they have either taken up different sports or they continued with the different kinds of activities, pre-accident or post- or just throughout their lives right. So how does sports factor into your life?

## Alexis: [00:15:09]

So I honestly wouldn't be where I am today without sport. I was always sporty. I wanted to figure out what that looked like now. I was hiking and, you know, I wasn't playing traditional sports. I was a figure skater growing up and just stayed fit. Well, sort of. I was 30 and forgetting about working on my arms and stuff. But whatever… the pictures of my travels in Venezuela showed me, I really needed to figure that out quickly. [laughs] But while I was GF Strong, there is a sign called Have-a-Go Day. BC Wheelchair Sports here in the Lower Mainland and SCI BC team up together now and have these awesome opportunities. It's hard not to want to get involved or it's almost… you almost have to choose not to get involved with all the things that are happening now in this world. But. There is this poster about a Have-a-Go Day and tennis. Now I wasn't a huge tennis player, but I mean, I played it now and then. And as you know, a quad with funky hands, I had a limited choice of sports. But here I go, I go down to the gym at GF [GF Strong], and I'm seeing people in these fancy fast chairs and they're swinging the rackets and I'm just like, “Oh my, oh, give me, give me one of those. I can't even move out of my chair right now, but get me in one of those!” And they strap me to a tennis racket and there right away, I was trying to figure out how to play tennis. And then, funny enough, later on was a poster, another poster at rehab about the tennis program that happened to be in the municipality that I was living in at the time. So. Honestly, it was boom straight out of the hospital, I was attempting to play tennis like… at that stage, I could barely push down a hallway in my manual wheelchair, so I wasn't doing much on the tennis court. The coach was open enough to lift me into the chair, you know, help strap to the racquet because obviously I can't really hold onto the racquet. So how do I do that? A shit ton of hockey tape. Hockey tape wrapped around and round and round my hand so much that I lose circulation and then I have to now push around a court with a club in my hand, taped, to chase the stupid yellow ball. What was I thinking? I don't know. It seemed fun - still does. But what it did was, just made me work out the muscles that I had. It's not that it was going to open up anything below my level of injury, but what it did was maximised what I had left and if I hadn't gotten into sport in that way, I wouldn't have known all the abilities that I could do now. I was, you know, it made me so much stronger for my day-to-day life and mentally. For me, sport is about what it brings to your life, and I know that not everyone can play sports, so it's finding something that feeds your spirit. Sport was that way for me and and that was awesome for my life. But if it's knitting, if it's a chess club, it's about getting out and meeting people and it's about ability, not disability and intermingling and being social because that is so difficult when you're transitioning from rehab hospital about-perfect environment to home, where, all of sudden, you're isolated, so it's finding somewhere you can do a bunch of things.

## Alexis: [00:18:49]

I wanted to step back also and talk about what tennis brought to me. Because I mean, I was not going to be an Olympic athlete, and yes, Olympic athletes can be inspirational, and you see them on commercials. But, as some of your paperwork that you sent me show, it's hard to relate sometimes. And I never related to people that went to the Olympics, I was never going to go to the Olympics. I am short, dumpy and I could barely push my chair around the tennis court. But I had a hell of a lot of fun doing it, and I had this coach that encouraged me. And the first time Nationals were local, he said, “Do it just go!” And I'm like, “Why? Like, I'm not competitive.” He says, “It's not about that. It's about doing it.” So they were actually in Whistler. It's the first time it ever traveled with disability. And I'm like, How do I do this when I use help? I, I use gadgets in the bathroom and stuff and over time… So that was my first time trying to do it away from home, I learned more and more. And then then I decided to go to Nationals the next year, and that was in Ontario and I had this epiphany: “Oh, these people with disabilities all over the world.” So if I need to get a gadget or a commode chair, I can actually rent one where I'm going. You know, I can get the stuff brought to the hotel. I don't actually specifically have to travel with it if I didn't have it at the time, I do now. But I pushed myself and pushed myself with the support of this tennis network to learn more and do more. And finally, when I was done with using all my vacation time for tennis, I wanted to travel. But now I could. I could wrap my brain around how to deal with my body in the bathroom. I wasn't an idiot. I wasn't going to go down to Venezuela and try to be backpacking stuff again. That would, well, I miss it. That would be fun. But now I travel to all-inclusive holidays. And I don't want to source my own food in some small towns so somebody can get my own food. But there' s a lot that tennis brought to my life that extended further and that, yeah, it's brought awesomeness to me.

## Chloe: [00:21:08]

So for me, as a researcher who's interested in this, what you show me is, when you have somebody who has a disability but obvious capa bilities, you know, just sitting there waiting to go out and make news and make the world different and change things. That, if you have supports, in a sense, those supports are necessary for you to launch and have that happen. And in this country, you're great if you have great family and friends, but our public systems really don't acknowledge that. They sort of… they disappear. They leave you at little caverns. You're in an accessible, maybe even public housing space, but you can't even use the outside space. Or, you know, there are all sorts of things that aren't sort of taken into account, or the common room isn't really even set up for a wheelchair to get into because it's got way too much furniture in it or whatever it is. So it just what it shows to me is not only how able you are, but, you know, that we need to do more.

## Andrea: [00:22:07]

Tell us about some of your other employment experiences, like you have a quite a diverse and a robust career. And that was the other thing that we found really interesting to talk to you about those different workplace experiences you had.

## Alexis: [00:22:22]

So, I mean, I was always learning, right? My first learning experience, after disability, because there I was 30, I didn't want to live on this assistance programs that the government provided. It wasn't enough. I had been, you know, I mean, I was traveling. Look, I was traveling with the accident. I was to movies, going to dinner. I wanted that life again. And unfortunately, with the amount of funds that the government gives, you know, if you're not able to do that, you are not able to get back on your feet and get back to work. It's not a lot. You can't have a lot of fun times.

## Chloe: [00:23:01]

It's not enough money. I mean, that was what happened with CERB is they gave 2000 dollars a month. And yet people with disabilities are required to live on 1100 a month. Right? You know, it just shows it's just not enough.

## Alexis: [00:23:12]

No, absolutely. So I was like, OK, what do I do? I'm going to step away from that funding. Scary as hell as a brand-new quadriplegic with funky hands that, you know, don't type properly or as quickly. And note taking isn't as fast. But as you can see, I have the gift of the gab and I can potentially sweet talk my way and… learned how to do skill set versus just the tasks. I think that was the biggest learning and where my ability to change career paths and do different things has been, is one - I can explain how my skillset is relevant to that present job. And at the same time, I've also been able to find employers who are absolutely open to understanding skillset.

## Chloe: [00:24:09]

What do you mean by skillset versus task, because that's a great thing.

## Alexis: [00:24:14]

So here, latest job is program assistant for stroke services. So I’m basically admin. And they knew that… actually they have a talent department and I was brought in as a project coordinator. And so I, you know, I can coordinate different things, and that is such a general topic, and that's because of my previous jobs.

## Andrea: [00:24:47]

In our previous interview, you talked about accommodations and having to deal with that and ask for them, but yet what you said previously about skillset? You're right. It makes one think of ability in a different way. So, not focusing on your disabilities, which we all have – some - but focusing more on skill set, which focuses, which is concentrating on ability. So I love that. Tell us a bit more about how your views of accommodation, maybe or your… you know, when you had that first interview after your injury, it sounds like it would have been a very different experience than this most recent set where you had everything on the table and were very open and frank. How has that evolved for you?

## Alexis: [00:25:42]

I didn't know what I could and couldn't do without hand function. I I had my typer gadgets, which I didn't bring to show off, unfortunately. But I have two typers that just basically hold my two pointer fingers out, and I can two finger type as I go along, and I have a very similar type of gadget that slides onto my right hand. Basically, it holds the pen versus me holding it, and it's very simple task so I can type. I could take notes in a pretty decent manner. I had those pieces before I even started looking for work. I truly believe you need to take responsibility for yourself and your accommodations, initially. Know what you need in general before going into the workplace. Because if you know that about yourself, about your needs then, and work on that conversation, you know, in your head for interviews, we always been told to prepare for interviews. Well, not just those behavioral questions that come up of “what is your best thing?” “What is your what are your least things your weakest parts like?” Those are the normal questions, but when you have a disability, there's another level. And that's where I think it's important to talk about what you need in the workplace ahead of time versus if it becomes performance review later on. If you haven't disclosed what you need to make a successful workplace. That is key of learnings over my last twenty-two years. You know, if you don't need an accommodation great, that's fine. But if there's certain things that you do need, if you need a bathroom door lightened so that you don't kill your shoulder, then talk about it. There's not many people that, in a maybe not the job interview, but later on, as you're first getting your first visit to the office that you have to talk to your manager about going to the bathroom. But it's the reality of my life anyway that I need to make sure that somebody can come with me the first time. Let's check this out. So I don't get locked in here.

## Chloe: [00:28:02]

So on the application, do you actually disclose, do you disclose in your letter or not?

## Alexis: [00:28:08]

It has varied. I in the beginning, I chose more to only disclose if they're federally regulated because of that whole, you know, there's a bit of a, not quota thing, but if you're federally regulated, you have the whole laws that you do need to be more open to hiring people with disabilities. But if it's a smaller company, then I didn't actually do that. Oddly enough, though, later on talking to a good friend who is immersed in education around employment and disability, it's actually it's more that smaller businesses hiring people with disabilities over the big guys, over whatever study that showed that the small businesses hired more likely. But nowadays, I actually did, more than not put it in my cover letter, because it's a sales feature for me. Look at what I've done in the sense of problem-solving techniques. You know, the good, the bad, the ugly that has come to my life and I strive to move forward and keep on learning. It is a sales feature now for me and not a deterrent. And if somebody thinks it's a deterrent, then I don't want to work there because I remember one of these jobs that I got a call back immediately because I mean, disability now is all over my resume and all of the volunteer things that I do and now that I do speaking engagements, I have it listed as well as one of my top jobs. So I'm like, can't really hide that I have a disability now, even if I wanted to. So the fellow… I was just trying to get was a part time admin position, it was on the North Shore here. It's going to be like five seconds for my house. Got a callback the moment I hit send on Craigslist and we start talking and he's like, “So you have a disability?” One, I could call them on what he just said, because you're legally not allowed to ask that question [Chloe laughs]. But I'm like, “OK, well, yes, I do. I do. I actually.” And I normally just tell people I I use a manual wheelchair for mobility. If you say quadriplegic, I understand that that's scary as hell. In most minds, that's no arms and no leg function, because that's what I thought, too. So that's I admit I do that. I don't mention my hands because I don't need accommodations around my hands. I have my own typers and my pen. I know that now I can keep up to speed, so I don't… I bring them to an interview because face to face interviews. I think it's important to, as I said, don't leave anyone guessing. Don't. People are going to make assumptions, and there are a lot of times better or worse, if somebody doesn't know about disability, they'll think it's hard for you, hard for them. How do we make this all work? Because maybe they're open to it, but they can't wrap the brains around it. So they're, you know, if they have one choice of a higher that seems easier than you, then they might go with the easier choice. So I bring my little typers into the into the interview to show that I can type and write and just take that conversation and worry out of the hiring process at least. I think it's important to me that the jobs I'm looking at are jobs I can do, for one. Yes, the reality is I do… I’m in your face with a wheelchair. So that's where I do also, make sure that I say, I speak about any needs that I may have and ease the conversation on how I do certain things so that people aren't going away guessing. But the main focus is ability, not disability.

## Chloe: [00:32:14]

So I'm intrigued when you've you know, your resume is impressive, and I think you're right now that you've done a lot of things, your disability to speaks to how capable you are. And but at the beginning it wouldn't have, but because your disability would have been the first thing they saw right, no matter what your resume said. Plus, your reference might have been your dad, [Chloe and Alexis laugh] which might not have been great. But I'm thinking, you know, given your experience, can you give us a sense of what, you know, the difference between what is truly an inclusive sort of work environment versus what isn't?

## Alexis: [00:032:48]

I had a really great experience at when I was in the IT department, at a clothing manufacturing company. And they, one, were so open to bringing me in. It wasn't about taking the box for them. I was up against this other hire. It was equal to whomever was going to get the job, and luckily I knew somebody as well and that she actually walked my resume over. You know how that, I don't remember the percentage, but if you get a reference from somebody in an office place that works there already, you have a much better chance of getting a job. So that's how I really got my foot in the door there. But I had been in a number of other places where I wasn't really… I felt like I wasn't included in the fun. So you can come into the workplace, you can get your job done, your abilities can prove themselves and you do well. But what about the fun aspects of work, the water cooler talk when you go for your coffee? Even sitting in the lunchroom chatting up people, and parties, social occasions and team building things. I felt like that's where I was sort of left out in many situations where I couldn't make my own coffee or tea because they never figured out a way to help me do that for myself. I had to have a little teapot at my desk. I didn't get to go and chat up people at the lunchroom because one - there was this huge heavy door in between that they didn't mechanize. And the…

## Chloe: [00:34:32]

Did you happen to ask them to, or not?

## Alexis: [00:34:35]

Honestly, actually, they eventually worked it out. And they put the button on the door. And everyone used it, because big cameras had to go through it. And it was amazing now that they could roll 100 000 dollars cameras through a door that all the cameramen could press a button, but for the longest time it wasn't, and there was no way I could… I was blocked. So, I mean, those infrastructure gets in the way of the desire for things as well. But going to the really positive workplace where you know, there's one thing when you see people go for lunch all the time. And that negative position, I felt, was on the corner of Robson and Burrard, like, there are restaurants galore, and everyone's going for lunch. And I was never invited. And I did chat to people. It wasn't that I was, you know, keeping within myself, but it’s like most of them, didn't know what to do with me. Right? But now I have this different position a few years later. And right away, the staff were like, “Hey, we go and go over the Commercial!” Like they drove off the North Shore to go for lunch. One, I thought that was crazy, but I'm like, “Hey, I'll get in on that mess if that's allowed to do that!” And so, you know, a bunch of the people would jump into my van as well when we go and do that Thursday lunch.

## Alexis: [00:35:55]

And what was amazing to me is when it came to team building. A new climbing gym had just been developed in our strip mall that we are in and the staff, the IT department, wanted to go to the climbing gym and I'm like, really? But actually, before they announced it, that that was what was going to be the event for that year, a couple of senior managers came to me and said, “OK, Alexis, this is the desire, but we're not going to do this if it doesn't work for you too. But we've reached out to this climbing ropes guru guy in Toronto.” (You know, we're in Vancouver) “and he's willing to talk us through how to do this. He's going to meet up with us,” I think he was going to be in Vancouver for a time. And so they met up and we played around with things. And there I was incorporated into this whole team, building exercise at a climbing gym, you know, and I say as a joke, I'm a chick in a chair. So that to me is inclusion in the workplace.

## Andrea: [00:37:05]

And that speaks to all of our EDI efforts for equality, diversity and inclusion, because it can be a policy and it can be something that a company might strive for, but real inclusion is about culture.

## Chloe: [00:37:24]

You know, you remind me of actually, I hadn't really thought of it until you're speaking. My very first job I had, I was in a wheelchair and I was in my early 20s. And I, you know, you're really unsure of yourself in a workplace like you just and I remember I had one great manager who insisted - it was an IT department again. Surprisingly, everyone's, you know, they're meant to be antisocial, but they weren't - and yeah, I had a manager who insisted, we all take a break at a certain time and go have coffee in the cafeteria together and just take 20 minutes. And I just presumed because I was in a chair and I was, you know, I was new, they weren't going to include me. No stop, wait up on the elevators. They didn't take the stairs. It is. It's about the culture that's led from the top right.

## Alexis: [00:38:03]

Yeah, yeah, absolutely. And I just, I think in that first job that I had one, as I said, the infrastructure, the way the building was built and needed to be built for safety because it was media, didn't allow for me to interact as well. It was on multiple levels. There was actually escalators and elevators. People coming and going and being reception, which was my first position there, I was behind glass. That was doors that were locked. I sat right beside the security guard, it didn't help that we didn't get along. [Chloe laughs] You know, it wasn't the most enlightened and happy environment. But I mean, the few staff that would come in to say hello, we're definitely those who were open to people with disabilities. Because, you know, if you're not comfortable or not, don't know somebody with disability, there is this level of discomfort of like, Oh, I don't know what to say. I just I'm not going to say anything at all

## Chloe: [00:39:10]

Or even with a quad even. I mean, I've been in and out of a chair and yet I… Do they want me to shake their hands? Do they want me to touch them? Like, I don't even… And I have experience with disability and I still have moments of just like, I don't know what I’m meant to do, right? I don't know what's the best thing to do.

## Alexis: [00:39:25]

And that's where you just ask. Again, where I say I'm tired of being asked, but at the same time, it is reality. That or just, “Hey, how was your weekend?” You're just a person that's at the, you know, at the office you “hey, how's your local sports team?” like whatever you do to start a conversation that somebody you don't know, you just do that. You do it in the grocery store line up all the time, if that person happened to be in the wheelchair in that grocery store lineup. It's no different.

## Andrea: [00:39:57]

You have so much wisdom to share, and I'm not sure it's clear to our listeners that you actually were doing workshops and working as a consultant in a way, so you kind of just alluded to it with your work with UBC. So tell us a little bit about how you came, how you came into doing or how you arrived at doing that and that work, of you as a public speaker as well.

## Alexis: [00:40:19]

So way back when there is a vocational counselor who helped me get my first job. And he also transitioned, he was able-bodied, but he, over the years , became more immersed in life and around people with disabilities and had speaking engagements that he needed speakers for. So he and I always stayed connected. We were always friendly and he would reach out to me to speak for these different employment, sort of, enlightening employers around people with disabilities. And so for the first 20 years of my life of disability, no I guess it was a little less 17-ish, I gave it away for free. Mark would call, I'd do a conference, I'd do a panel or Spinal Cord Injury BC would need somebody and you would just talk about it and do it. I was working in the IT department happily. Full time. Great job. Good money. When Mark called me one Thursday morning and said, “Hey, I've just been” … you know, where he was working, he had just gotten a grant to work with four specific employers to teach them over a two year span on how to be more inclusive in their hiring practices. He called me if I wanted the position. It paid a third of the more than what I was making, but for a two-year contract and I'm just like, That is scary as hell. But OK! [laughs] I was paying a mortgage at the time or, you know, I had a mortgage, had a home, solo in my life, and I'm like, more money is always a good thing.

## Alexis: [00:42: 09]

So that was such a learning experience to really formalize what I had been talking about. This was where we had to make workshops for these four employers around disability awareness in general. We had an hour-and-a-half course for that, hour, hour-and-a-half course. And then we wrote one about accommodations and mental health in the workplace and for two years talked about all this stuff and really made me even more comfortable so that when people meet me, like you guys, you say I sound good or just can come across naturally with the topics. And it's because of, I've done it so much now. When that job came to an end and I needed to still make money, I still kept on having… well, by that point, I had Barry in my life and with a second income, I had the luxury now to pull back and work part time. But it also meant I could still source out and try to find speaking engagements. Covid happened really quickly into that timing and kind of shut that down, I did try a couple of speaking engagements over Zoom and I mean, we spoke about it. It's just with a little face picture, it's not as poignant as seen me in person in a wheelchair as I speak with my hands and they're kind of funky. And it's not as fun over Zoom. So I actually gave up for a time. And we'll see what happens as we all transition back.

## Chloe: [00:43:47]

I mean, you raise so many issues there. One is, you know, many disabled people aren't paid when they share their expertise. Many of whom who can't work, or are on pensions or on whatever they are, the rules are that they can't earn money or very minimal money, so they can't even take pay. So I think that's a way of devaluing what they have to offer, and I find that really problematic. But you have thought so much about so many things. What would you advise someone who's young and disabled and heading out, you know, maybe from university. Because people are now getting sort of education, they can get educated if you have a disability. But what then? What would you advise them?

## Alexis: [00:44:29]

It's funny, I mean, I may have had to change my direction of employment from a stand up point of view to a seat and be more office directed, but I don't think about it as if I have a disability before I think about the work. It's the work. If what I've chosen to do is something I can do. Just go for it. It's all I can say that, I mean, it's nothing about disability. It's about going for it. It's scary as hell. And I know that if you are in that loop of money situation, the reality is, I had to step away from it and push myself and just do it.

## Chloe: [00:45:15]

It's very scary because some people can lose their housing, they can lose their nursing, they can lose all sorts of things, even if they make an attempt, right?

## Alexis: [00:45:23]

I know that… I think I was at a time that didn't ding me if I made so much money, where I do have care at home, funded by the government. I'm on the Cecil program where the government money comes to me, and I hire my own people. I believe now it's a lot harder to get on it, if you actually have money in the bank.

## Chloe: [00:45:45]

I mean, on that basis, I mean, you say go for it. I was a young PhD student, and I couldn't get a job while I was in the chair. There was no way. I’d get interviews… And as soon as I was out of a chair, because I have a condition that waxes and wanes, exact same CV, I had offers. What should we do as people, members of our, you know, our towns or provinces or this country to make this more possible that we get somebody as capable as you, we get to have the benefit of your abilities in the world, right? How do we get there?

## Alexis: [00:46:22]

I mean, it's such a big topic. I sit on a committee that advises all three municipalities of the North Shore. I know that all the municipalities of Metro Vancouver have an advising committee on disability and, basically, the built environment is what they're focused on is the built environment. But if you build it, they will come as well. But I am pretty happy that on these committees, it's not just the group of people with disabilities shooting the shit and talking about stuff. There is a staff person from that, from that municipality and a Councilperson. The focus isn't around advocacy, you have to be careful there. It is just, it's about making your municipality better. It's getting in and talking to your government officials. Obviously, initially, we talk about top-down. We have to convince the top. If that's your workplace, if that's in speaking engagements and getting the certain crowds that you want to talk to, and government. And I think people are listening a bit more now, it seems, with a lot of the legislation that's being developed now. I mean, it's been live in the U.S. for over twenty-five years. It's not perfect. It's again, a general overlapping policy that is impossible to touch on all topics and all disabilities, but at least it's a conversation, and I think that's your starting point is a conversation. Because until somebody is first faced with somebody with disability, they might not… they don't mean to not include you, but it's just not a part of their life, their reality. So until they're faced with it and need to deal with it, then they might wake up. Part of my speaking engagement is that… it's understanding that the part of the whole life experience is disability. A natural part of life is becoming disabled. We all become disabled. If it's later in your years or I call you the weekend warrior: you go out on Friday, plan to have some fun, and on Monday you sometimes come back a little more maimed than you planned. [laughs] Life brings on disability.

## Andrea: [00:48:52]

Very true. Very true.

## Alexis: [00:48:54]

My support system, at the time of my disability and as has developed over the years, is stupidly awesome. I know that that's a huge factor in all of the things I've been speaking about today that brought together the right people at the right time. And not everybody has that. I don't wish disability, I don't wish a spinal cord injury, on anyone because it can fucking suck. But [laughs] I just wanted to live. And in my case, you know, you guys have asked, how do I, what would I say to new people: just live whatever that looks like for you.

[music]

## Chloe: [00:49:43]

Thank you for listening. We hope you've enjoyed Broadcastability. You can find us on the web at [theproudproject.ca](https://www.theproudproject.ca/) and [broadcastability.ca](https://www.broadcastability.ca/). You can also find us on social media at “The Proud Project” on LinkedIn, Facebook and YouTube. And we're TheProudProjectCA on Instagram.

[music]

## Chloe: [00:50:08]

Broadcastability is produced by the Proud Project at the University of Toronto, Scarborough and by Easter Seals Canada. The music in this podcast was composed and produced by Justin Laurie. Isabelle Avakumovic-Pointon created Broadcastability’s cover art. Jessica Geboers and Isabelle Avakumovic-Pointon edited this episode.

[music]

## Andrea: [00:50:32]

We would like to acknowledge the University of Toronto, Scarborough and our podcast partner Easter Seals Canada for supporting the production of these podcasts. We would also like to thank our funding partners, the Canada Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, the Center for Global Disability Studies, TechNation, and the Catherine and Frederik Eaton Charitable Foundation for helping us create Broadcastability.

[music]