Brooke

[00:00:00]

Hi, thank you, Brooke. For joining us today would you like to, to introduce yourself?

Sure. It's well, it's a pleasure to be here Tomer my name is Brooke. Good speed. I'm the founder and executive director of get included. Which is a nonprofit outside of the greater Philadelphia area. And our mission is to service individuals with neuro divergent needs and incorporate high levels of social inclusion for those individuals.

So what does it mean to be neuro divergent?

Well, I think that's an evolving term that I recognize as something that changes over time. Right now, I would say the best definition of neuro divergence is someone that falls outside of what we think for norms of interests and behaviors. I, it also incorporates to me mental health and anyone that feels isolated or alone, and that doesn't fit in for our purposes.

[00:01:00] At our nonprofit, you know, we welcome people that feel like they don't have a community elsewhere. Wow. But how did cause when I walk in to get, you know, I see so many smiling faces everyone behind the counter is just, it's, it's more than a job for them. It's it really is a community. How did that get it start? Cause you don't just one day have an idea, like I'm gonna start this cafe and it's gonna be incredibly inclusive. Like how do you build something up like that?

Well, it started something very different than it is today. And it's really evolved as we find out more from the community, what they need and, and that's really what what I love most about our mission. When we first started in 2015, really I wanted selfishly to have a place where I could. Be with my family and my friends with my neurodiverse child and my other children as well, and really feel like we weren't [00:02:00] an outcast that we were able to go into public spaces and be accepted for, you know, who we are.

That's actually a theme that I've noticed with many activists where their desire to contribute to the community stems from their own challenges and, and their own contexts and their recognition that their challenges are not unique to them.

Many people share them pretty commonly. And I'm sure that's something that you've actually noticed. Mm-hmm do people come up to you and, and are like, Hey, I'm, I'm so glad because I have these issues and then. You can actually resonate with them. And then you have this bond because you both see the world through this kind of shared vision in this, even if it's only in one respect to life that you guys are able to bond over that mm-hmm

Yes, absolutely. I I find that, you know, when you're in a dark and lonely place reaching out and being able to share your experience with someone else is really key to, [00:03:00] you know, being human and disability is really just a part of the human experience. And you know, whether we like it or not, we're all gonna be touched by it at some point, personally.

And also through our loved ones. And I think that for me, that was something that I felt quite honestly, a lot of shame about when I first had my son, I felt Really sorry that I didn't appreciate how challenging this position could be. And just being in this community, how lonely it is sometimes.

And I've, you know, been in the healthcare field for my entire career, taking care of people. And it wasn't until I had this uniquely personal experience to say our community, our, our environment does not is not a welcoming place for everyone. And I, I really, it was a big wake up call to me to, to have been so blindsided by the needs of the community and how unmet they are.[00:04:00]

So you, you do mention a little bit about, you know, the trials that you have as a mother to a neuro divergent child and your background in healthcare as , a nurse practitioner and also with get cafe you're, you're a business owner. How do you find time when you have all of your personal challenges to be able to be such a pillar for the community?

Well, I think first and foremost, that it's a community and that it is not just me. And in all of those roles, I have so much support that really make it possible for me to be able to participate in my career. You know, at, at work I have like a wonderful research team I work with. When I am in that role as nurse practitioner, the cafe is such a living, breathing organism.

Where we have so many phenomenally intelligent and, and creative people in that space that have helped really develop this [00:05:00] wonderful thing that we've created. And in, at life at home too, I'm really, really feel blessed that I have a wonderful care team for my child a wonderful husband and, and children and, and fantastic family and friends that really make me able to be in a place to, to be, you know, my best.

That's great support is so important.

Yeah.

I know that we're gonna be talking a little bit about what lessons get actually gives to the communities so that other communities can actually, make organizations like get obsolete where get, does not have to solve these problems because they're actually, solved by the design of, the infrastructure. Before we get there. I, I wanna talk a little bit about, you know, what are your plans for get? How did it really get here? What is here for it and what are your, your goals for it? How do you wanna see it grow?

That's a great question. So when we started, we just simply opened a community space. If you've been to our cafe in our birth in the [00:06:00] back, we have a very small little community room and that's really what the first space we opened was. And the need was just to find a meeting place for people who had the same needs and wants for support. We did some art classes and some support groups, and we started wanting to offer like classes for all ages and all abilities and so we originally started by wanting to offer classes for all ages and all abilities. And I really felt strongly about those classes being co-taught with someone neuro divergent and someone else with some teaching background, I guess, collaboration and learning from others is what's really, , I feel like a fundamental core belief of mine.

And so I wanted to like create that environment where we could start to create classes that were taught by this all different types of stakeholders in that space. And we did that and in developing just these weekend classes, like [00:07:00] a sensory based art. We realized, wow. The need for employment for individuals with neurodiversity, or I'm sorry with individuals with neurodiverse needs is a huge problem.

Like I, and that's really where I felt like, oh, I have no idea how bad this problem was until now.

I know that out of my own experience as an autistic individual, that I have worked with lots of nonprofits and some of them are amazing. None are, none are, none are like bad nonprofits. I stand by the work that each one does, but it is a different beast when you're working with a group, which is informed at a high level by the very stakeholders that they're trying to help. Because it makes sure that the organization's views are truly aligned with those that they're, that, that are receiving the help. And it makes sure that they're heard. And at the end of the day, if, if you're helping people, but they don't feel heard. They get hurt.

Yes. That's such a good point. I, [00:08:00] I tread really lightly and I make sure that I try my best to try and get the input of people on the spectrum because the actually autistic movement and people that are, you know, truly struggling, like my, I have my experience as a parent. But that's my, that's where I sit as a stakeholder. And that's not the only, this, this just doesn't happen in a vacuum. And I truly believe it's the same for people on the spectrum. You know, and it's hard. It's part, part of the challenges for that population is just a, it's not the same level of advocacy. Self-advocacy, you know, I work with breast cancer patients now clinically and it's, we have so much advocacy and self-advocacy in the breast cancer movement and I long for that.

But collectively when you have. You know, 40% of individuals or, or near there with autism have some type of intellectual disability or other impairment. So that's really challenging for that subset of the population to get [00:09:00] up and be advocates for themselves. So I think we need other stakeholders in this space, like parents, family members, therapists, healthcare providers to truly build that infrastructure

Like you were saying, it's about having the support there.

Yes.

You know, you can empower others to be able to pursue change on their own without being the one, pursuing the change for them, just by being able to, to help them do what they wanna do.

Correct. You have to always value someone's autonomy. Someone's well take each, each person and treat them as an individual and, and look for their needs. You know, we have, we have people who just don't wanna work in a coffee shop that need employment. And I try to recognize that and give. Those individuals, other job opportunities within our nonprofit. Because I don't also wanna shoebox everyone into having to work near a loud espresso machine, for example.

But we can only like do so much, so we try to have as far reach as possible recognizing that there will always be limitations.

Yeah. So I imagine that some [00:10:00] of the initiatives that you wanted to start with yet have, you know, Kind of faded out of focus because, there's only so much someone who's stepping into the arena as a nonprofit founder can really anticipate.

And we're always trying to do the best with what we have at the moment, but as new opportunities come up, as you realize that certain things are more efficient, you're trying to, , make a change with limited resources. How, how have you had to adapt and how has get had to pivot to be able to offer the opportunities that it does today?

Well, we've, we've evolved quite a bit since we opened and started we've grown the , I think what I'm most proud of is that the extent , into the community is really, really grown and we've grown tremendous roots in NABI and within the local community and within. The main line, special needs community, quite frankly.

And beyond seeing [00:11:00] people of all walks of life all occupations, you know, every diverse individual coming in and being able to get something from being in this space, whether you're a customer you're coming in for a volunteer opportunity, you're working in our space. I think that being able to see the impact on each one of those individuals and see how and by impact, I just mean what happens when you're in a space that's inclusive.

Like what does that do from the, the energy the wellbeing of each individual in that space, and then the collective wellbeing as a group. Like, I think that's really the magic that we've created.

And that's what I've heard from many of the stakeholders that I I've gotten to be around through the respite events through the fundraisers. I mean, everyone is there to support and everyone is there, you know, not to support someone else, but because they actually see it as their own community, that's something magical.

Yeah. Well, it [00:12:00] is. I be, you know, I want everyone to feel like they belong there because as long as you're respectful, that's really the only line we draw in the sand to be quite honest, is respect for a person and others.

And beyond that you know, you're welcome and we will, it's a space where you can be vulnerable. Mm-hmm I feel like a lot of the challenges that we have when it comes to access is because we don't really take vulnerability into account when designing systems. Because at least personally, I feel like there's this facade to some degree that people need to put up just to be able to get by in their day to day life and not to comment on the necessary, you know, aspects of that facade.

Because for many people you know, there is a beneficial aspect to putting it, to putting it on, to be able to like, you know, get through a tough moment by maybe faking it until you make it. But at the same time, when we get used to [00:13:00] seeing everyone's facades, we assume that there are not challenges there that these people are going through, which makes it hard to be able to design opportunities that are equitable because in a way we're not really aware of those opportunities that need to be there.

But you have done a great job at, at listening to the community's needs. And I'm curious what ki, like, if we were to, to design a, a new city a new city that would in, in, in which get would be obsolete, what, what would you like to see design? What kinds of maybe policies or infrastructure? Maybe even just like, what does it look like?

What kind of thoughts do you have on that? That's a great question, I think for,

well, let me think. So for, from a policy standpoint point because I think that that kind of, it lays a framework of how you, interact and how you are as you're being in a different space. We need to design [00:14:00] for the most need in the community. And , therefore everyone will benefit if the most vulnerable can be supportive in an environment.

And like a chain, like a chain, like do you mean like if you have a chain it's only as strong as the link that doesn't get the, as much attention and Polish? Yes. Yes. 100%. Because if, if you leave something behind, I think then you're creating some strain in the system. And then if you have that strain or you're experiencing that strain either as a unit or some, some like nearby being thing then, then that's like a cancer in a way.

Right. It just, it it's a bad thing, which it best by design and grows and gets worse. Yeah. Yeah. And then, and then that becomes like a sinkhole or something. I, I don't I don't know if I'm saying this [00:15:00] too figuratively, but I, I do think that when you think about like cities of the future spaces of the future what does it mean to universally design something that the universal design principle movement is actually it's growing a lot of momentum.

Yeah. People are starting to recognize that to actually visit the, the chain metaphor. It's not so much a question of what's the weakest link in the chain, because you can always Polish and, and take good care of the chains and by doing so you ensure that all of them have the opportunity to be the strong chain mm-hmm

And, and that's my understanding is a, very big aspect of. Universal access and accessibility is ensuring that everyone is better off by having everyone be where they need to be to make everyone better off. Yes. That's perfectly stated. I love that.

I think that more broadly you know, [00:16:00] accessible healthcare is really, really important to me. My lens on neurodiversity and community really comes from this health basis.

And when I, when I look at get, and I see like the benefit that it has, a lot of that benefit is. How it supports people to be healthy in their communities and in their life. And without, you know, we, we might think of just our physical body and the food we eat and the, the sleep that we get and the healthcare prevention and maintenance that we do.

But like, that's not the only thing that impacts our health. How we, where we live the resources, we have access to like jobs even. Yeah. So that's, that's exactly right. Jobs. A job is more than just a [00:17:00] paycheck. And it, we can even think about how that paycheck impacts people by having income. And that creates financial security.

And with financial security, you can have housing security, more likely. And so we know that employment is a social determinant of health. because it provides stable income, but also it provides socialization and opportunities to be outside of your home, which are really important. And so it affects health, I think in many ways beyond just what we might think of as this economic freedom to, you know, be able to access better healthcare.

It's so much more than that. And I think that that's really what what I think about designing future spaces are really about how do you, and a lot to what you were saying, how do you optimize someone, you know strength space and get every person to their ceiling. And you'll be very, like I'm continually amazed and proud and [00:18:00] surprised you.

At where we can go and as an individual and even myself, or, or as a group, as the nonprofit grows, it's like, yes, we have to really believe that people are, have these incredible capabilities when you remove barriers. And when you, you provide means to have everyone be able to learn in their own way, in the way that they best learn.

Then, then the future is really the sky's the limit to Mars and beyond,

So to maybe help listeners that are interested in following in your footsteps and putting together an organization that will enable them to pursue real change in their communities what was it like when you were first starting out and even when you were deciding, like, is this the best way to go about it?

Is this like an effective way to go about it? How do you, and like how, how did you settle on this? Was it easy for you or like, was it [00:19:00] natural? Did the, the blocks kind of just fall into place and then you found yourself like, wow, this was like a really effective idea. I'm glad because it's enabling so much great change or was it something like.

I'm really struggling with trying to figure out how cuz I see all these problems, but it really upsets me. Like I, I feel like I'm alone, I'm not able to, you know, meet people with the same issues. And I need sort a community. Was it was something like that. I don't wanna put any words in your mouth, but yeah, no.

It was, I was personally going through a really hard time with all Oliver, my son I was, he had a really wonderful pre-K experience. They welcomed him into this education. Like his, his entrance into education was so perfect. I couldn't. I couldn't have asked for anything better from the school environment.

They, they saw him for who he was valued him, saw how much of an impact and how [00:20:00] wonderful it was for his classmates. And so when I, when we started with kindergarten, it was like this dark cloud came over because I, we had the polar opposite experience and I was like just shattered and he was shattered and I couldn't do anything about it.

And I was in my private life, like stomping around and, you know, going into just like my child was not being treated correctly. And , it didn't matter what I did. I couldn't really effectively make change in that environment. And so I needed an outlet very personally. And I was like, you know, anytime trying to look for something to do outside of the school and not being able to find.

You know, can I come to this because, but here I have to like, get, tell you about my son and then I just wasn't welcomed. And I thought, I, I, this can't be like, I will not raise my child in a, in a world that is not gonna be able to accept him and us for who he [00:21:00] is. I, I, and again, like we had had this wonderful experience where his classmates, his classmates parents appreciated the, you know, the empathy that he brought out in his classmates.

And that was just not the experience when, when he went into the school system. So I, I was like mad . And so I went on Amazon and bought a, or I went to Barnes and noble maybe at the time, I don't even remember. And I bought like a Nolo nonprofit for dumies book. And I was like, I, I. I need to do something to make this better for him.

And I know that I'm, I know there are other parents that feel this way too. Because online at the time, it wasn't, my story was one of, you know, like endless. And so I had a lot of you know, I tend up until this point. I really tended to have you, I was a very type a planner and I took a leap of faith [00:22:00] because I felt like I really I don't wanna say like, my husband always jokes, actually.

He says, I told him that the universe was calling me at the time, but I think what I meant by that was that I can't sit back and not take action. You know, you talk about being an activist or an advocate. And for me, that really was like not letting the system just passively trample us. Like I was just not gonna let this happen.

And if one little corner of the world changed a little bit and if it was the right change to happen, like I felt like that would be a ripple effect. So, so that's how it started. It was really just like, I I'm gonna learn how to do this. And I I surrounded myself with anyone that I could talk to, to help me as a mentor in the space.

I made a ton of mistakes and have evolved, and I'm, we're still doing that. We're, we're, we're at this point where we're looking at the future of the organization [00:23:00] and I think I know what it's gonna look like, but I'm also not naive anymore to say that I can predict what it's gonna be like in five to 10 years or beyond.

I mean, I, I just want it to be this growing living, being that it is and continue. And I think that as. Or like, as inclusion evolves, we will understand where we fit into that place. I just wanna see us as leaders in that movement. Because I think we have the right stakeholders to inform like how, how to do things.

I can't tell you how much of what you said resonated so much with me. Because when I transitioned into the school system, I, it was so challenging. I mean, I had a, a similar experience where, you know, my youth it was a, a Montessori program. Mm-hmm and I even still [00:24:00] remember a lot of it, not so much like, you know, narratives of it, but like experiences and emotions that I felt during that time with like images that flash by, and it was fantastic.

But then I got put in. To the schooling system. And I, I didn't even have an underset that like, I could not put together an idea of like, why it was so different. Yeah. Like I had never really, I guess been explained, not that it would've made too much of a difference to me at the time. Like having, it explained, being able to like internalize that, but to know, to imagine that opportunities, like what I've been able to experience now at the respite events and just seeing the opportunities at, at get cafe. It would've really made a difference in my life. Like unimaginably, it would be so different. And I, I actually, I wanna ask about that. Get include. It's such a wonderful [00:25:00] tagline and a name for a cafe, because immediately you realize this is more than just a cafe. This is not just like a Starbucks, but like it's it's community owned or anything. This is a place where the experience is more important and the community is more important than the drinks than the, the food we're going there. Like the, the, the main chorus is mm-hmm , you know, the friendship. Yes. That's so true. Well, I just wanna say that I'm, you know, I wish that we didn't have a shared experience with the educational system.

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What's deeply, profoundly sad to me is that, I mean, we had a really challenging situation. But. That's nothing in comparison to many parts of this country that are so under resourced.

And and so I think that, that we need to fix, we need to fix what inclusion really looks like in our school systems, because it's, it's just not happening in the way it should. [00:26:00] And that is supposed to be a sacred place like learning is that's it. And if that's not protected, then we have a, a huge problem with the foundation of, you know, our communities.

So, I think that's definitely like something that we should touch on, but get included the name. So the name get is short for great expectations together. That's was our original name of the organization and it was really long and cumbersome. and when we opened the cafe, we were like, well, we don't wanna call it great expectations together, cafe.

And I didn't wanna use, you know, some people had said like, make it like Ollie's place, or like, but I, I really wanted it to be about the community, not necessarily about my personal experience or my family. So we had called the organization get for short. We officially had named the nonprofit get included.

I wanted the [00:27:00] action to speak from the community. You know, I didn't want it to be like, get inclusive. No, it's like, from the stakeholder's point of view, if I wanna get included, I want like you are welcome into my space of inclusion. So we yeah, that's sort of how, where the name came from and how we think about it.

I really like what you were saying there, how you said it. I'm definitely gonna snip that and put in the beginning. I think it's gonna be a great opener. Okay, cool. Is there cuz we can, we can pivot to really any topic. And I'm just wondering like what have we not really had the chance to give it time to shine of the topics?

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So funding, well with any nonprofit funding is like a huge mountain to overcome always yeah. I've learned that the hard way. and it's not just financial funding. It's it's human capital too.

Right? Mm-hmm getting all the help you can from as many people that you can and what that looks like as you evolve is very different. We were so grassroots in the beginning. And we grew out of [00:28:00] some of the relationships that we had with collaborators, just based on where we were evolving. And that's really more as an organization, our funding now.

So I'm proud to say that the cafe has been self-sufficient and profitable since about 11 months in which thankfully that was. 13 months in, we hit the pandemic. So we were really lucky to have established a local customer base that the cafe revenue supports our payroll for the most part. Now when we do extra events and when we do our community outreach and as we grow, our funding comes from outside sources and primarily we have private donors, community donors.

Our grant work has been really non-existent to be honest. And that's just because to do grant funding correctly, we need a big team of support. And so we've applied for a few grants. We're still applying, but [00:29:00] we just don't have the manpower to really go after huge dollar signs at this point.

Mm-hmm , you know, I, I'm glad that you mentioned that, you know, it needs to be self sustainable as a business. Because I feel the public sentiment of nonprofits is, oh, these are just magic organizations, which, you know, just fix problems. Right. Oh my gosh. And then people get upset. Like, what do you mean that the money I'm donating goes to pay people's salaries?

Like I want to fix the problem. Yeah. But you'll understand, like it needs to be sustainable. And in many cases like paying those salaries is actually contributing to fixing the problem. Not just like acutely, but like systemically. Right. Well, you have to build systems and resources to solve problems and that doesn't come without funding, unfortunately.

And that's something that we, you know, I recognize that we'll always struggle with. And a good nonprofit will live as close to red as possible, but we're not actually getting [00:30:00] in the red, you know, you wanna spend every dollar really, really thoughtfully . You have to make those decisions about what's an investment into something that could be more meaningful or helpful for the problem later down the line.

And sometimes, and sometimes you wanna spend the money and you can't right away. And so that's something that's sort of, I, I struggle with and, you know, and learning daily. But, but we're getting better at, and, and certainly the, the coffee shop functioning as its own thing is, is important for other reasons as well.

So most fundamentally, if someone wants to open another coffee shop and staff it like we do well, I'm happy to say you can do this and you can have a business for your loved one or for your community that has this mission. And it can still be able to function without tons of donor support. And I think that's really key for thinking about inclusive business spaces, because our greater mission is really to impact [00:31:00] small and large businesses and be able to help support more inclusive hiring and more inclusive communities in that.

And in that aspect of social life,

I like how you mentioned that, where cuz you you've really framed. I think, well, the argument about the importance of inclusion because nonprofits like inclusion, isn't, isn't just some like some social word to, you know, for the purpose of like, you know, getting attention. It's not like a, a Google AdWords SEO word.

But it actually does actively contribute to the resource base of a nonprofit mm-hmm you know, it's not just like, oh. We're a nonprofit let's, you know, be socially forward, let's be inclusive. It's like , , we're working with limited resources. And our problem that we're trying to solve is, you know, the opportunities that these people have and what do you know, these, these two issues like they, they blend so well together by providing these opportunities to people that [00:32:00] normally wouldn't have opportunities.

And by creating a space that lots of people feel free and comfortable coming to, you know, you're actively creating the revenue stream that helps support fixing the problem.

Yeah. I mean, I'm really proud to say we have 40 employees on payroll. And I mean, I think the vast trying to do the math in my head, but probably easily 75 to 80% of those more it's probably closer to 90% self-identify as neuro diverse and. That payroll is not cheap, but the community wants it. You know Starbucks is a mile away and Starbucks has a place I don't I want to see other businesses have inclusive employment and I think we're going there every time I pick up a catalog and I see advertising that's inclusive.

Or if I go and see someone working that is neurodiverse or has a disability that really makes me happy. And it makes me feel like we're getting there.

[00:33:00] How do you see the community that has developed around? Get. Evolving in the coming years. Just what, what kind of goals do you see yourselves as trying to achieve? What's the dream?

Yeah. Well, that's a great question. We, we have some exciting new projects on the horizon for us, which will be really crucial to how we expand and grow over the next several years. I think one of the most exciting for me personally, is that we're going to be able to formalize our research program.

And that's where we're going to look at health more specifically related to employment for this community. And I think that once we can develop really sound research program to look at outcomes, then. It's a different conversation. When you have some evidence about the efficacy of your programs.

What are those programs gonna look like?

Yeah, [00:34:00] so a few different things. So one of the things that has been a goal of ours for the past several years is to identify how we can provide more employment opportunities for people. You know, I'm really proud of our payroll, like I said, with 40 individuals, but it stops there. It really, we can't add anymore to the current space.

So being able to help 40 people's fantastic, but really it's the, the need is so much greater. So one of the things we've been thinking about is how do we design you know, it's not the right terminology to call it like a training program, but for lack of better Descriptors, you know, how can we develop a program that trains people to reach their ceiling?

Like I was talking about, right? Like we think we have a, we have a unique approach and we've seen our staff grow measurably. Like it just, it's been tremendous to watch everyone's [00:35:00] skills expand and their confidence expand. So once we can provide this like nurturing teaching environment for people who need jobs, then really their, the, the end goal for us is to see someone leave our organization and go get a job somewhere else.

I mean, that's, that's true victory for me. As much as I love our staff and our volunteers dearly, like when they get placed somewhere else and they're not around us very much, then that's like, we've done something really meaningful. So we're working with Thomas Jefferson university to help us really move our mission to the next step and to create a job force and an employee force that's comprised of individuals with neurodiverse needs and package those people to be the amazing individuals that they are capable of working.

And, and really those organizations are standing out to say, [00:36:00] we believe that people with neuro divergent needs can benefit our, our company and our growth and sustainability over time.

So that's one way that we're tackling you know, the larger systemic problem. And then by, you know, doing this multi-pronged. Approach of let's build a way to be very pragmatic. How do we, how do we help people? Really our job is how do we find out what, what accommodations you need in the workforce and how do we make those accommodations successful?

Like what supports do you need? What's trial those supports so that when we go to employer, we're like, oh, here's so and so, and they're, you know, amazingly talented and can do all of these things. And then the only, it's just really, it should be a sidebar if they need this, this and that. So as we do that and, and spread our fabulously talented and smart and creative employees into other work environments [00:37:00] outside of our organization the other thing we strive to do is just have a more public presence with more cafes and we're raising money to build a very large commercial kitchen to do a lot of that training. So we're gonna be, I think, making box to go meals similar to these meal kits that you prepare at home. It's a great opportunity to be able to have cooking skills. It's, it's really like a life skill and not only is it create employment opportunities, but it also contributes to health when you so much of our cheaper foods are not healthy and not, not good for us.

And it's a whole nother topic, but I think one of the things that we're doing with the, you know, nutrition department and some of the other departments at Thomas Jefferson university is really to look at how do we make delicious food that nourishes our body and prepares us to be like optimal in our work in life.

And I'm sure that people appreciate that, you know, get cafe really, isn't just a cafe. Like it's not just even beyond that, just [00:38:00] opportunities to hire people that maybe would find difficulty elsewhere. It's beyond that it's it's skills and not just skills, but the the confidence to apply those skills outside of get it goes beyond that.

It transcends the experience that they have there and they take it with them elsewhere. And then new opportunities open up for, for more people to come in.

Yeah, I mean, we looked at a lot of different models. We thought we thought about different business opportunities we could open and coffee shops are really a unique place where you, you have this like community setting and you really have this really special place.

I, I don't know. There's the only other. I think of bars or probably like a similar parallel, but we can take the negativity of what alcohol does to people sometimes. And like caffeine's a lot safer for substance, but but no, so, so a coffee shop is great [00:39:00] because it's this unique opportunity for people to practice and to interface with all different walks of life and diverse need diverse people in the community.

And you have conversations as you're making their cappuccino or talking to them as they're working from your coffee shop. So it really, it works so well, both ways the customers get this understanding of the value of a different perspective and you can see that. And so it, it is definitely more than just the job opportunity.

It's. It's just to showcase how, how really the human potential and, you know, it's, it's right there. Yeah. And being able to quantify the outcomes. Mm. That'll really help set the stage for other organizations to, to justify kind of branching out. And, and I feel like a lot of [00:40:00] companies, it's difficult to negotiate with your shareholders and be like, this is a, this is a real thing.

We can have a real impact. And people are like, oh, well, how much of an impact is that really? Like, are we just throwing away money to do this or that like, no, like here, now we can actually show that this is a meaningful community contribution when you open up these opportunities and it's not just, you know, A public a, a publicity stunt.

No, no. Right. We don't, you never want diversity and inclusion to mean like some checking, a box of filling. Like we need this type of person to be represented because it's, it's more than that. And I think you really, you really need to know that it for businesses outside of, of us or, or our organization, there is a huge value.

So it might cost a little bit more. There might be a, a slightly [00:41:00] larger investment in the beginning for the, the employee. But it, it will, the return on investment is huge because the commitment, like, I think that, you know, when you haven't been given opportunities, And I hope this part will change. This is why I hope we become obsolete.

And but I think when someone hasn't been given the opportunity to, maximize their potential, and then they do all of a sudden then you really have like, that's an inclusive space. And then you can see that the gifts of that person the reward for your business, right? Like I have a feeling, but as we measure these outcomes, we're gonna see that like having a truly inclusive workforce will mean your employees will take less time off and your employees it'll be healthy and you'll have less turnover.

And I really do believe that that's what we're gonna see when we have definitive clear research published. So I, I hope to see that too, because I feel like the community [00:42:00] regarding employment in the United States, at least. It kind of assumes the worst about our workers and when that's kind of the context you're stepping into, it really makes you wonder why are we assuming the worst?

And it's not always the wor it's and I wouldn't even say it's not always like it generally isn't the worker's fault that they no, you know, that there are these patterns and employment it's it's in order to be able to see like the true value of your employees. It's not enough to have a bunch that are producing and being productive, but having individuals that had not yet experienced like what their potential is, they will be performing at their potential because it's magical when you're, when you're able to do it.

And to, to people that kind of take that for granted. They don't even think it's it's necessary to them. It's not special to be, you know, finding something that they care about and being able to be passionate about and contributing to and there's really no incentive to want to[00:43:00] put in their all because they're not yet passionate about it. and with get, you are showing people how amazing it can be to feel included and want and, actually just feel able to, break their limits and go beyond them.

And I think it's just so much more sustainable and so much more enjoyable for employees when they're seen as more than just employees. Yes. Part of being part of the workplace family, we feel that way. And I think that, you know, again, like workplace culture is really important, knowing that you're, you're building your showing up to your shift is contributing to like this growth of an organization of a business.

The sustainability of the business, all of those things. If you, if you're not including, you know, your workforce to embody all of those. [00:44:00] Wonderful accomplishments that you and milestones that you meet as an organization, and you're really selling the entire group short. And I think that's part of the key to being truly inclusive is to really give space and give time.

And then with the right supports, the, what, what you get is something that's really beautiful. Yeah, I think we were talking about, you know, one other thing I wanted to talk about really briefly in terms of like, thinking about these financial places in the future, this is a huge problem.

Like how social security, disability limits people's ability to work. And that you can't get those government benefits and work a full-time job. It's just you can't make more than $1,200 or something a month I wanna say is, you know, if you make more than, wow, that's literally less than my rent.

Yeah. And it's certainly not like, it's just, again, this is like this idea that we're capping [00:45:00] someone's ability. Like we're automatically just assuming that someone that hasn't been able to traditionally meet some, some like qualifications of being normal or neurotypical, then. In order to get the supports from our government as they stand now, which, you know, adult services, that's a whole nother conversation I can have on another day, but the services are really lacking for adults with disabilities.

And so when you have a limited number of services and then a limited cap on your income, like how many people can work more than a $10 an hour job, right. And that's an insult to me to hear that that you can't even hold a full-time $10 an hour job and get your disability benefits. There's something really broken with our system.

So I it's a complex problem. I'm not saying that it's one that's easily solved. And I think that there's a lot of [00:46:00] nuance and, and policy develops with best intentions often**.** But there's also a lot of loopholes. . That you Al always aren't aware of that you aren't always aware of until you enact that policy. And then sometimes in the best interest of things, you have these challenges that later down the road, you have to sort of work around. And that's, that's one of the things that we need to think about as a larger society and really how we change policy, because that's a huge bottleneck. It's not even a bottleneck, it's just a ceiling.

It, it really limits people. And there's only so much we can do and we're gonna have to make policy change a, a priority moving forward. And often even if that is a slow process which I recognize it can be at times, like it's still, we need to be persistent. It's the same with research, you know, good research that's well designed and has.

Really strong statistical [00:47:00] thoughtful methods takes a long time to do. And, but that doesn't mean it's not worth the time and effort. And it's the same with policy change. I think that we really have to take every small step to make these things better for the future. How do you think that these stakeholders that have so many challenges to getting before you can even talk about getting your voice out?

I mean, they have challenges to being able to, to live on their own or to be able to hold a job that doesn't really care about, you know, accommodation and knows that it can get away with whatever, because you know what they're gonna be so focused on like finding another source of financial security that they can't even hold, you know, this other job accountable.

Like how do people like that actually get a voice in the political rotunda? How do policies become. By them. Yeah, it's so hard, but I think you [00:48:00] need when you need organizations that can speak as groups one individual voice is really important, but a collective group is, is much more powerful. So I think that other nonprofit fits and other community organizations really need to join together for collaborative efforts and things like policy making.

I personally think that pairing with universities and larger organizations that can drive bigger projects and bigger research endeavors home are, are, is really important mix also. And, and approaching all of this with a lot of dedication and a lot of patience. I think those things can't be understated, but we can do things as a group so much more efficient, efficiently and effectively than we can individually, but we have to be able to give this group a voice.

And that's part of the problem that's been historically. I mean, it's hard to see someone not have the proper [00:49:00] supports. And I think that we think of things like the wheelchair ramp or the doorway being wide enough and it goes way beyond that way beyond that. And, and I think businesses might think of something. So for example, one accommodation that we give that we found has been really successful is just asking people, do you have a better time of day that works for you when you work?

Some people because of medication because of their sensory regulation, whatever, there's a whole list of things because of their home life or their, you know, transportation to get to work is often a challenge. But so just finding that, you know, Joe might work much more efficiently in an afternoon shift and then accom making that accommodation is just once, once you make that change and you can see how that can impact the flow of your business and your employee force and your customer base, it all is a worthwhile investment.

And, and [00:50:00] as you make accommodations for people that need them, and then it just works. I don't know how to explain it, but you could just fill the gaps. You hire to, to strengthen your group, right? You hire for the needs to make your business grow. And that in includes finding people that can really work within the team that you've built.

so that's, those are sort of the approaches that we take. Mm-hmm I imagine that maybe as funding becomes more available and the, as get grows that finding collaborations and partnerships with other organizations so that you guys can all leverage each other's particular expertise and resources will probably be something that emerges down the line.

Yes, I hope so. I hope so. I mean, I think also the visibility locally in NABI, we've had other businesses ask for some of our employees like, Hey, I'm hiring and that's, it takes this, like, there is something really profound about removing the stigma. And so that's what the physical space [00:51:00] does, right?

Like we can do all sorts of things behind the scenes. But when you. Repeatedly interface with people who are different than you eventually, you don't see the difference. And then that's where we can really see how valuable we can be to other people as humans is just normalization. Yeah. Changes the paradigm.

Yeah. So people might be like, oh, what's it like to hire someone on the spectrum? And then you come in and see that a everyone's different there. So there's not gonna be some known necessarily, but really that just, that's just like a human in their, like, you know, just being unique, just being unique.

And it's really, it's nothing scary. And I think that the more you're around that, then the more you can accept that. So, you know, putting anyone who's different in a box, in a school, keeping them at home outside of the community is never gonna be a good solution. Like that's just not gonna work. And I [00:52:00] think that What I say to other businesses, looking to hire people who are neuro divergent.

The first thing I'll say to them is the staff is the easiest part of getting included. Like that is the easiest thing to deal with is the accommodations 100%. So if we can do it with our vast majority of, of our staff, having needing supports and accommodations, then I would love to see every business just have at least one person or 10% of their staff, you know, really, truly represent what it's like in, in the world.

Mm-hmm and like you said, it, it takes the, you guys are like a lighthouse. You're attracting people to think, oh, what's so special. They walk in. and they realize it's not really that special. It's actually a pretty normal thing. Yes. Like it's not like you guys have some magic, you know, that makes it possible to have differently abled [00:53:00] employees.

You guys just give them the chance and you're willing to work on it. Yeah. And it's like, you know, my own experience working in, in Starbucks Starbucks did try to, to help and, you know, put me there, but it's a very different atmosphere because they're like thinking, how do we, how do we make it more open versus how do we just have an open atmosphere?

Yeah. It's, it's different. Yeah. There's like there, you know, it's hard to put like, well, can you give me some guidelines for how to do this? It's no, not really. And with the exception of meet people where they are, and then. Think of, you know, you have to be creative to say like, there, there can't just be one way to do things.

That's, that's limiting anyone. And I think that the things that we've many of the accommodations we've made on the individual level, we keep for the group because everyone finds them helpful. So you know, whether that's just a simple thing [00:54:00] such as labeling the drawer, the cash drawer with like the dime is 10 cents and the nickel is 5 cents and, or having visual pictures of what food should look like as it comes out, really clear instructions.

Just giving people more time. These are a break area. Yeah. A sensory break area. Mind that to, to relax right. To just decompress because it's, it's really important to be able to like recognize how we modulate our own behavior. And around others and with others, when we're trying to collectively like solve a task, like make this cappuccino or wait on this customer.

And so there are many ways to do that and there's not a one size fits all. So that's, that's really important. And I think when you have bigger, large scale businesses that have these policies that, you know, we train this way, like you have to be a little bit more open. Too much rigidity is really, really where we can fall short and, and [00:55:00] not service this population in the way that they deserve.

We see ourselves as evolving And I think if we define ourselves too narrowly, then we really sell ourselves short of the opportunity to make considerable change as we move forward.

So the main crux of our mission is social inclusion. And that really, when we think of social, it's just community and that's in our workplace, in our living spaces and in our social interactions. And how do we do that in a way that that fits the needs and includes the most people. And so whatever that looks like in the future, I know jobs will be part of it because employees like, for example, with autism, I mean the employment rates are under 12% and that's not okay.

So we have a lot of work to do in the employment space and we're going to always be present in that space. Because I think that's where we can really help with. [00:56:00] Developing a program of training and research and development and innovation and intervention. Beyond that though, like social life means respite.

It means being part of community celebrations and community events, it means giving back to other nonprofits. And it means showing up in other aspects of our life, like caring forward, the work that we're doing there. So, so I'm always open to new ideas. You know, the pandemic of course has limited some of the things we can do, but as we move out of the pandemic, we're reintegrating these in-person community events, which I think are really core to our, our mission and to what we wanna do.

So looking forward to all sorts of new opportunities, no one thing you did mention is like being able to pivot, not wanting to define yourself too narrowly. and with, with ency the organization behind activists HQ, it's like [00:57:00] we started out as a, a beach cleanup organization. Mm-hmm and eventually that grew to, you know, be conservation.

And then at the time 2016 with the Dakota access pipeline indigenous rights and then human rights and social rights, and it just kept evolving. And we were trying to figure out like, what, what are we really doing? Because, you know, we, we can't do everything, but what is the one thing that we can do?

Well, mm-hmm and, you know, activism literacy, like instead of taking a part in every role, we help others and empower them to do what they do best. And I think that, like, I really resonate with the fact that you, you understand how nonprofits need to be able to adapt. And sometimes new meetings just evolve over time.

Yes. Right. And that's, I. because how could we have predicted where we are today? And also, like, we also need to respond to what happens over time and like the needs of the community [00:58:00] change based on things that happen over over time. And we we're never going to say, we're just doing this one thing, because like you said, it like the community and the, if the stakeholders truly drive the mission and truly drive what's important, then how that is, operationalized becomes very evident in what you're doing.

And I, I can't really be more descriptive than that is just, it will be what it needs to be. If you're listening to the needs of the community, because those needs will change over time and that's a good thing they should, if they evolve and you evolve, then you're continuing to you know, make. Make them make meaningful change happen.

And that's, that's really key.

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There there's one that I think would be great. Okay. Who was your first employee? I get Elise Pearson. Do you know Elise? I don't think I've had the pleasure yet. No. Oh, you have to meet Elise. Elise is a fantastic anime artist.

But Elise really taught me [00:59:00] a lot about the needs of young adults who are in this transition onto school and becoming independent, which I I feel like that phase in your twenties for anyone is really like this, the foundation of your self discovery and for people that have been, you know, through the school system and maybe beyond with a lot of different types of supports and therapies, it's hard to all of a sudden transit into like independence.

But we learned together about how, like the best way to , support her and others like her and, and not like her, you know, and it was really it was really a wonderful opportunity and all of our early employees. and even now, like I learned something from each one of them. Yeah. Because it's, it's truly informative of how to, how to just maximize potential really.

It's about getting to know that person and that person, the disability or [01:00:00] the, the, the diverse need or whatever might, it's a part of that person, you know? And I hope that people are proud of that. Like I'm proud of Oliver for exactly who he is. And like, I can't imagine him being any different. So respecting someone for uniquely who they are. And then, you know, it's not like you want anyone to have to like, live by our like norm normal roles or, you know neurotypical, there, there should be a, a gray area in between where everyone sort of. Making making a grace or, or having space for the other person, because it's not like having one person fit this mold.

It it's really both people sort of, sort of coming to a place together to say, oh, I understand how we can work together. And you can be you and I can be me and we can figure out how to make it [01:01:00] successful for both of us. I think what I'm hearing in what you're saying actually answers a previous question that we were talking about, which was like how do, how do like other companies actually make the shift to be more inclusive?

And it's less about, as you were just saying what do we need for this one person and more so about what assumptions we're making apply to everyone that spend less time. Trying to build a one size fits all solution because it's actually easier to just, put more faith in our managers to be able to, , work one on one, rather than like having a system, which doesn't really have that adaptability and that nuance to it.

Yeah. There's this really wonderful place. If you can give people creative and enough autonomy. And I do think it's really important for management staff too, because management shouldn't be just this like delivery of one policy [01:02:00] and manual thing over. And I mean, that is, I don't think you have happy managers when you have that situation.

I think that, you know, when you have a team that really feels like they are contributing to your business, then that is so important. That's also really important to like, You know, there's nothing, there should be nothing above anyone, right? Like, I'll go in there and make a cappuccino or clean the bathroom.

It's it's like we're in this together. And some of the best work environments that I've been in have been the ones that everyone can roll up their sleeves at the end of the day and say, how do we just do this to make it work? And like, it doesn't have to be this regimented thing always. So that's foreign to some people I think.

And well, the more organizations and companies that do it successfully, then I think you're gonna see other people have less reservations about trying to be more inclusive. And again, [01:03:00] it really truly is about just meeting an individual's needs. It's it's the same with like personalized medicine. It's like, get to know that person, what do they need to be healthy?

What's the employee need to be supported. And when you put the effort in you get someone who shows up. Loves their job and grows your business. And that's like magic. I think that actually hits on something you've been alluding to throughout. Like when you mentioned that employment is a social determinant of health, that these are related like it's not just a job.

It actually does involve their health. And just as medicine is not a one size fits all solution and needs to be personalized, tailored to the individual's needs. The social determinants of health should also be factored into that equation and how the infrastructure for those are built should consider how like their relationship to the . Stakeholder's health.

Yeah. To appreciate that relationship. You, you can't [01:04:00] separate them either. I think this is the problem is like, and, you know, coming from it as a healthcare provider gives me a little bit of a different. Lens to see things through when you're sitting there and you're seeing someone who's sitting in front of you and they're sick and they're not whatever the problem is. You know, it doesn't, it's not always just one thing that's contributing to that illness. Even if that illness came from some exposure or something, the, the factors that you have to control, like you can maximize someone's quality of life and their mental health and their physical health, even in the face of life limiting illness.

So I think that we should be doing the same thing in social spaces for people with other needs. It's not, it doesn't have to be anything more than just saying, what are the barriers and challenges you have to success. So if I'm sitting and talking to you as a patient, I'm gonna say that [01:05:00] also, like, what are, what are, what is, what are the challenges that we're having that are limiting your health? Or causing this illness or manifesting as this illness. And the same thing at work like the infrastructure has to be there. You can't just have someone get their 40 hour a week job, right. We have to consider their disability benefits. How do they get to work? What are their living situations? It, it affects so much more and it affects all of our communities.

So you know, this is something that parents should be interested in as well, because how would I continue to work? If my child doesn't have opportunities as an adult, like there's, there's a profound impact in our society that, that our lack of inclusion has. And I think that when you really sit back and think about it, then you can understand that it, it is a problem that everyone needs to help to solve.

I couldn't have said it better myself. I'm sure you could have, but thank you for the compliment.