



Transcript of podcast with:

Alan Brightman, Senior Policy Director of Special Communities for [Yahoo! Inc.](#)

Chauncy Rucker (CR): Welcome. I'm Chauncy Rucker and I'm at the 2008 Technology Innovators Conference. It's hosted by the National Center for Technology Innovation. The theme this year is "Thriving in a Global Marketplace." I'm having a conversation today with Alan Brightman. Alan is the senior policy director for special communities at Yahoo. I'd kind of like you to talk about [your book] *DisabilityLand* since I don't know anything about it.

Alan Brightman (AB): There's a book that I did with Apple's support probably a year and a half or so ago and we wound up calling it *Connections: In the Land of Disability*. Apple liked the title; I wasn't sure exactly what it meant and then as people talked to me about it, they said, I don't exactly understand what that title is either. So after they distributed the books that they had had printed up, a legitimate publisher, not a vendor, said we'd like to pick up this book and publish it, do you have a title for it? The book was mostly kind of anecdotes about things that have influenced me, things that have mattered to me over the years. The more I thought about it, the more I was thinking about kind of a sort of mythical place that doesn't really exist, but it's where disabled people may bump into non-disabled folks or they may fall in love, might bump into an institution that doesn't understand them, and so it was the whole anything, do you know, that had disabled people in the middle of it somehow and that then all of a sudden it struck me, we'll call it *DisabilityLand* and let people define that however they want.

I just see people, and I forget exactly how I described it in the book, but it was people who kind of roll around, bump into things, bump into people, make mistakes, but it's all, it's like stuff you'd hear in the locker room rather than the stuff that's necessarily polite.

There's a little story in the book, probably the shortest story in the book, which is a true story about a little boy who I think was nine or ten, but he might have been six, probably six, and he was deaf and his parents had bought him a little puppy dog. And after a few days, the parents discovered that the puppy dog was also deaf so they returned the dog. Now if you're the kid, right, you're saying when's my day going to come? When are they, who are they going to bring me back to?

It turns out that there's a lot of sad humor-if that means anything-in *DisabilityLand* where you know mistakes are made, things fall over, people bump into things, but you do get a much richer sense for who are these folks. Whether these folks mean a disabled person or the spouse of a disabled person or someone who's never gone bowling with a disabled person that's going to try it out for the first time.



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And it's just fun for me, what it enabled me to do, was to take lots of years of locker room stuff and just kind of just being in the world, and saying this is a great opportunity to put this stuff down between the covers in of a book. And quite frankly, if no one ever saw the book, if they published it and it only went to me and mine, that's fine. This wasn't about selling a bunch of books. It was about capturing some incidents and moments that you just don't want to forget. So now they're there, I don't have to worry about them.

CR: Is it still in print?

AB: Yeah, in fact it just came out new as *DisabilityLand* three or four months ago. What we decided to do at this conference, no one knows this yet except just a few NCTI people, is to tomorrow morning when people show up for breakfast, there'll be a book at everyone's place right so they could just, it'll be there, just because it's not the usual kind of disability stuff. And you know some people will like it, some people will hate it, and some people will asked it to be autographed and put it on eBay you know. But that's not important to me; what's important to me is that I can go dive into that book anywhere and go, I remember this!

Because there's an international [theme]-two quick international stories that stay with me.

One is and I'll try to make this very, very short because it actually was long incident. There's a state school in Denmark, one of the few state schools that at the time still existed, because Denmark was all you know community residences and deinstitutionalization but this was a state school, and we went up to the second floor, my host walked me around. And there was a crib next to a window and in the crib was a 22 year old woman who was being fed by a tube with an attendant sitting by the crib just kind of sitting there. And my host said to me, here's the story about this woman. When she was born, they expected that she was going to live about a day. And after a day, they thought maybe they could keep her alive for a week. And when a week went by, maybe she'll stay alive for a while. Now you fast forward it to 22 years later, the woman is not responsive, she is being fed by a tube, but she is alive. And so my host turns to me and said, So she was supposed to live for a day, she's now been living for 22 years, is that a success or a failure? And to this day, I don't know the answer to that and no one I tell that story to agrees on what that answer is. Like most things, the questions are more interesting than the answers.

So let me leave you with one other question. When I was in Sweden, they took me to a school and it looked like it was like ten o'clock in the morning, it was a school for developmentally disabled kids.

Quick digression, forget Sweden for minute, I'm in the UK and their minimally verbal kids in the UK are a lot like our minimally verbal kids. [They] have a few phrases but not



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much going on, but the minimally verbal kids in the UK sounded so much smarter than our kids just because the accent you know. They're speaking minimally verbal with the Queen's English!

Anyway, back to Sweden. So I'm touring through this school in Sweden, and we open one door and it's a reading class and it looks like a you know, apart from the fact that it was very colorful and it was kind of like all that Scandinavian design stuff, it looked like a regular reading class. And then we would go to another class, and it was a speech class and it looked like a regular speech class. We go to a third room 10:30 in the morning, you open the door and the entire room is lit in red light and there's in the middle of this classroom, there's a dance floor and there's some kids on the dance floor dancing. There's one of those reflective balls in the ceiling like a disco ball twirling around. There's a bar off to the side with a couple of kids drinking. And I thought to myself, I have, I don't know what this is. I mean it's 10:30 in the morning, we're at a school for developmentally disabled kids, reading class was cool, speech class was cool. What is this? Well what it turns out what it was, the notion was this. When we say mainstreaming, the Scandinavians said, the Swedish people said, it's not just rhetorical. It's not just kind of to sound nice. We sat back and we thought what is it that would make our kids, if they were in the community, look out of place, look like they didn't belong? And well one of those places would be a disco tech in those days. And so they said, well why shouldn't we have a class in disco tech. Why shouldn't we have a class where you could learn how to order a drink, how to pay for it, how to get change, how to make a tip, how to ask someone to dance and then follow-up by dancing and it went on and on. So it was like, well I left and came back to the United States, and I couldn't help think, What are our discos, right? What are our disco techs? What have we put in place that makes our reality match our rhetoric?

And I still think that we still have, we speak with a lot of hope about what we could do, but it's not applied hope. It's sort of word hope. Ever since I've known my first parent of a disabled kid and from then on, these are people who are connoisseurs of hope, right? You can't just keep them going with pretty words. And so I go back to this disco and I think to myself, they had the idea of mainstreaming and this is one way to operationalize it, that's to say this is what we mean. And to this day, when I talk to educators, I ask them what is your-not so much what is your vision-but what's your disco? How have you put your words into action? And often times they don't know, you know so those are my international stories.

I think it can never hurt to have a vision to dream a little bit, and yet in education today there's also a disincentive for dreaming. And it seems to me, if you are a dreamer, particularly about what's possible for kids, then your job as a teacher ought to be to be creating dream-makers. You know, so you're dreaming, but there's no test to test for



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that stuff so no one pays any attention to it. So aren't you glad you asked me that last question?

CR: Absolutely. Thank you very much Alan.

AB: My pleasure, as always.