



NCTI 2009 Innovators Conference

Podcast Interview

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Transcript

It's a pleasure to be with you. The reason that I'm so excited about being at this conference and the reason that I traveled all this way to be here is really because I think it's important to thank the innovators, it's important to thank the policy makers, it's important to thank the officials and individuals who have dedicated their professional career and dedicated their lives to trying to make life better for people. As a blind person I'm a product of special education programs and services offered by our public schools and ultimately the reason that this work is so important is because it ultimately gives people a sense of hope, it gives people a sense of optimism. These conferences go beyond policy, they go beyond technical components, they go beyond the missions and agendas that are presented and really focus on the idea that people are going to have better lives, that people are going to have better opportunities, and the work that is being done by all these different organizations has such an absolute profound effect and such an absolute profound impact that it's measure could never be overstated. Ultimately what I'm here to talk about in terms of the role of social justice and what it means, and what it emphasizes, is it calls me back to one of the first cases that I worked on in which disabled people were sitting outside in all types of inclement weather in Detroit, Michigan waiting for buses to come that would have operable lifts. But back when I first started a number of years ago the buses didn't have lifts that were operable. The drivers weren't trained on how to access them and use them so people with special needs and people with disabilities would wait outside for six, seven hours. It wouldn't be uncommon for people with disabilities, wheelchair users, to spend entire evenings in bus shelters, hoping and praying the next bus would stop and pick them up. And I refer to this story because due to social justice, due to social activism, and due to our court system, ultimately what happened was that the US Department of Transportation got involved, and the US Department of Justice got involved, and guidelines were established that didn't just affect the Detroit Department of Transportation but affected transit providers on a national basis. So now disabled people, whether you're in Detroit, Los Angeles, Chicago, New York, you can ride a bus in an effective efficient manner and have the opportunity to go where it is you need to go when you need to get there. We recently has a case against my own university, the University of Michigan, in which the university was denying access to paralyzed veterans who wanted to access the University of Michigan stadium. After two years of litigation in the federal court this case went far beyond what Michigan stadium had to do, and seats at a stadium, and



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what compliance standards had to be established, but it affected building codes for not just universities but for all commercial facilities all across the country: malls, shopping centers, hotels, restaurants – any commercial facility was affected by the outcome of this litigation. And in that case we were blessed to have the help of the United States Department of Education which led to the intervention from the United States Department of Justice. The reason that social advocacy is so important is that when we look at technology, technology is the new frontier. Technology is the greatest equalizer. Technology provides the greatest amount of opportunity, the greatest level of optimism, and the greatest level of enthusiasm amongst the disabled population because within the disability rights movement we've been focused on access, access to buildings, access to education, access to aviation, access to facilities – the next most critical thing is access to technology. What is critical that must happen is that there needs to be guidelines and standards established for technology the same way that these guidelines have been established for transit providers, or universities, or educators, or aviators, or the different entities that we've been fighting with and advocating on behalf of when it comes to disabled people, we have got to establish the same guidelines, principles, and standards. We have got to have appropriate, effective government intervention to help in this area, to make a difference in this area, to have an impact in this area. One of the cases I'm going to be talking about is a current situation that is involving the development of the Kindle, which is a product of Amazon. What is ultimately happening at universities all across the country is that technology is going to replace course packs, technology is going to replace textbooks, and what is ultimately going to happen is that Kindles, which is what Amazon is hoping for, are going to be used in lieu of all these other types of things that we have come to know in college classes. The challenge for the blind and other people with disabilities is that for whatever reason, the Kindle is not a currently accessible product, so disabled people, especially blind people, are unable to access this device, are unable to use this technology. And why this is such an important opportunity at this conference and that this organization has given, is to create awareness, and with awareness comes understanding. What is happening to the blind is that when they attend universities it will often take 3-4 weeks for them to get all of their texts in an accessible format. It is incredibly labor intensive and it's incredibly time-consuming even with the technologies that campuses currently have. What is of such great concern is the fact that universities are entering into contracts with Amazon to use Kindles again rather than using course packs and textbooks and the things that are currently used, which is putting blind people at a tremendous disadvantage. The idea that your fellow student can have their materials given to them instantaneously and for you it takes weeks to get your materials is an incredible gap that can be incredibly disconcerting, and incredibly difficult to overcome. And what happens when it comes to activism is this: is I believe that



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everything happens for a reason, everything happens for a purpose, that we might not understand what that purpose or reason is, but it happens in such a way at that time and that place, and I believe that I have been blessed to be the chairman of the Board of Governors at Wayne State University and thanks to that opportunity I have been able to work on this issue. And this is why advocacy is so critical, and why advocacy is so important, because what we ultimately did at Wayne State University was we passed a unanimous resolution stating that until this problem can be corrected and for whatever reason this technology is not accessible and until this technology can be made and delivered in an accessible format by Amazon, then we have indicated that Wayne State University will not allow the use of Kindles for any of our classes, unless or until this technology can be operated in such a way that is accessible and can be used by anyone and everyone for all university purposes. But until that can happen, until that time, we have indicated that we will not contract or allow the use of Kindles in university classes by university personnel, and what I think that is going to do is since we were the first institution to do that, I truly believe that this is going to make a difference and we have just learned that other universities, based on our resolution, are now coming forward and passing similar and current resolutions to our resolution.