

AT Banter Podcast Episode 293 - World Blind Union

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SPEAKERS

Rob Mineault, Lis Malone, Mark Workman, Ryan Fleury, Steve Barclay

- R** Rob Mineault 00:00
Hey, and welcome to a another episode of AT Banter. This is this is of course the podcast where we talk with advocates and members of the disability community to educate and inspire better conversations about disability. Hey, my name is Rob Mineault. And joining me today, Mr. Ryan Fleury.
- R** Ryan Fleury 02:52
Hello again.
- R** Rob Mineault 02:55
And also here with us. Once again. Lovely Lis Malone.
- L** Lis Malone 03:02
Thank you Rob. Hello.
- R** Rob Mineault 03:05
And of course we have Mortimer the dead rat holed up somewhere in Ryan's basement wall. Making Ryan's life very interesting.
- R** Ryan Fleury 03:17

Indeed. Very smelly anyway.

R

Rob Mineault 03:19

Yeah, yeah. I I'm telling you everybody it seems like everybody on the show today is is working through some issues. So that's a miracle that this episode is happening.

R

Ryan Fleury 03:31

The show must go on.

R

Rob Mineault 03:33

It must go on

L

Lis Malone 03:34

Everyone are troopers.

R

Rob Mineault 03:38

It's true

R

Ryan Fleury 03:39

We can start playing ABBA's Super Trooper

R

Rob Mineault 03:41

Yeah, that's right or Trooper Raise a Little Hell, there you go. Or is that was that were they We're Here For a Good Time, Not a Long Time.

R

Ryan Fleury 03:52

Yeah, Boys In The Bright Red Sports Car. See, there are lots of Trooper songs.

R

Rob Mineault 03:56

Sorry, you have to be Canadian to get any of those references. And old. And we have no Steve Barclay which is why of course there was that big pause with no banter banter because he's currently in holding hell, trying to get through to his bank to do something. So we're going

currently in holding pen, trying to get through to his bark to do something. So we're going we're going no Barkley today. Bark free. Yeah, we're bark free today How are you guys, other than really hot and in a really smelly environment? With dead rodents that may or may not be giving you the plague as we speak.

 Ryan Fleury 04:48
It's all good.

 Lis Malone 04:50
He's a trooper.

 Ryan Fleury 04:52
COVID Didn't get me, either will a rat.

 Rob Mineault 04:54
Yeah, well, I'm pretty sure I'm sure the plague, I'm I think we can cure it. I think maybe I'm not sure if they have a vaccine for that, or if we got that as kids, but maybe. We'll find out. Anyways, Hey, Ryan.

 Ryan Fleury 05:12
Yes, Rob,

 Rob Mineault 05:13
Why don't you tell our audience what the heck we're doing today.

 Ryan Fleury 05:19
Today we are joined by Mark Workman, who is the Chief Executive Officer of World Blind Union. Welcome, Mark.

 Mark Workman 05:29
Thanks for having me.

 Ryan Fleury 05:30

R Ryan Fleury 05:30
Thank you for joining us.

R Rob Mineault 05:33
So I guess I mean, I have to start off by saying, Mark is so dedicated to this podcast, he currently is doing this interview with COVID.

M Mark Workman 05:46
It's true, but I would I would rather have COVID than be on hold like Barclay.

R Rob Mineault 05:52
That's true. It's less annoying, that's for sure. I tell you, I'll just go on a little mini rant, because that's what we do around here. But does that not annoy everybody else that, like no matter where you call these days, you're always get a phone tree? Like you never, never phone somewhere and just have somebody pick up and say, you know, hello.

R Ryan Fleury 06:12
Unless you call Canadian Assistive Technology for tech support.

R Rob Mineault 06:18
Way to work in a plug. If you want to talk to Ryan directly. You can get straight through.

R Ryan Fleury 06:26
I need to get working on that phone tree.

R Rob Mineault 06:33
That's right. It's only not there because you haven't figured out how to do it. All right. Well, listen, well, let's get serious. Why don't we start out Mark, and maybe you can just give us a little bit of a brief snapshot of just what the organization does and what sort of its mandate is and how you got involved?

M Mark Workman 06:57
Yeah, I can. I'll give a kind of a high level summary. And then we can drill down if there's anything that interests you. So the history of the WBU is that it was founded in 1984. So it's

almost 40 years old. But it was actually created when two other organizations came together. So there was an organization called the World Council for the Welfare for the Blind. And then there was another one called the International Federation of the Blind. And the first one was more of a service provider organization, it was a collection of service providers. Second one was a collection of advocacy organizations. And I gather that they actually didn't get along too badly, which is somewhat surprising, given how service providers and advocacy groups get along, at least here in Canada. And so they decided that because of the duplication of efforts that they were experiencing, that they would come together, and they did that in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, of all places in 1984. So we've existed in this form for the last 40 years or so. Now, the Secretariat, as we call it, so that's where like you actually have paid staff. That's much more recent, it started in around 2007, 2008. So for the first, you know, whatever that was 20 plus years, it was pretty much all volunteer run. So they would elect a table officers, they would like boards, and those boards would do all of the work. And they decided to actually put a little money aside and hire some staff to help make sure that the mandate was being fulfilled. And that happened around 2007, 2008. And there's been three CEOs since then the first one was Penny Hartman. And she was in charge of the organization for about 10 years. And then a gentleman named Jose Vieira, between 2018 and 2022. And I recently joined just over six months ago, in January of this year. What we do, and I think of it as in two broad categories, one is advocacy. And the other is capacity building. So for advocacy, we would be involved in representing or advocating for blindness issues at the international level. So sometimes that would be with the United Nations body like the World Health Organization, or UN Habitat, or it might be going to a major international conference, like the World Urban Forum 11 that we recently attended in Poland. The second category would be capacity building, and I guess I should pause and just say that World Blind Union is actually an organization made up of other organizations. So CNIB, an organization you're probably familiar with, is a member as is National Federation of the Blind in the US, and 100 other organizations around the world would all be member organizations for the WBU. So under that capacity building bucket, we are basically trying to support our member organizations to empower them so that they can do more work, be stronger advocates provide better services in their local countries. And we might do that by providing training workshops. So Marrakesh Treaty is a good example. This is the treaty that allows for cross border sharing of accessible materials. So we might provide a series of workshops on what is the Marrakesh Treaty? How can you use it in your home country? How can you advocate for its ratification if your government hasn't yet adopted it? And we provide that type of information and support with the hope that organizations in the local community can further their own advocacy interests at home. So that's sort of like a quick summary of the history and the big buckets of work that we do?

R

Rob Mineault 10:58

So now do does it sort of work as a little bit of a network between all the different organizations? Like do they quite often come together and talk amongst themselves and share advice and resources? Or is it is it mainly sort of, you know, centered, where, where you're providing the resources to them?

M

Mark Workman 11:17

Yeah, it's a good question. I would say, it's both. But we could do probably better in both areas as well. So we do have something called the General Assembly, which takes place every four years, where delegates would come from countries all over the world, to a specific location. In

2016, it was in Orlando, Florida, in 2020, we intended it to be in Madrid, Spain, but that was June 2020. And so COVID put a stop to that. So our general assembly was delayed a year and was primarily virtual, there was some small elements that were in person in Madrid, but it was largely a virtual General Assembly. But that is, that's something that happens every four years. And that is an opportunity where countries can make connections and learn from each other and participate in conversations. The other mechanism that we have to allow that is we are divided up into regions. So that helps by having a little bit of a collection of organizations or in countries that are closer geographically, so I won't, I won't rattle them all off. But there are six regions. And right now we're in because I'm in the US right now. We're all in the North America/Caribbean region. So it includes Canada, US and a lot of Caribbean countries. And so those countries, those regions also have their own ways of meeting with one another. They elect their own kind of governance, their own president. So the current North America/Caribbean region president is Kim Charlson, who was president with ACB, the American Council of the Blind, and currently works for Perkins. And so the regions, I think, also create another opportunity for countries to collaborate more with one another by said that, I think we could do better. We're we're working on a couple of other things, we're working on an online platform or tool that will hopefully facilitate some collaboration. And, and we're working on improving our communications as well, like we we've invested a little bit of money in our last budget to improve our communications. And for me, that involves not only us communicating out to the world, because a lot of people have no idea who we are, but also communicating, or like allowing or enabling organizations that want to get in touch with us to have more opportunities. And then the third piece is helping, maybe facilitating conversations among organizations, because I think they do want to help each other. They do want to learn from each other. But if we can play a role in helping make that happen, and I think that's sort of our responsibility.

R

Ryan Fleury 14:06

I find it interesting that, you know, I don't think I had heard of worldwide union up until the continent for Ukraine was launched. You know, here in Canada, like you mentioned, we have the CNIB, the CFPB, the CCB, all these different organizations, but I hadn't been aware of World Blind Union. Is that kind of how you guys want it just to kind of be in the background and let these local organizations take care of most of the meat? Or would you rather be more in the public eye?

M

Mark Workman 14:37

That's an interesting question. I mean, it's interesting to me too, because we are headquartered in Canada. So the fact that Canadians aren't aware of us, for me, that is a concern. I definitely don't think we should be stepping on the toes of other organizations or interfering in their work, but I would love it if more people knew that we existed and knew what we were all about. I've been doing some presentations here at the American Council of the Blind, virtually because of COVID. But a couple of times people have asked like, how can I, as an individual get involved in WVU. And what you do, and that's a little tricky right now, because we're an organization that's made up of organizations. So it's typically through your organization, that you would get involved. But I'd be interested in figuring out ways or thinking of ways that individuals can have a bit more of a role in maybe it's with respect to influencing what we do, or providing us with their input, that that kind of thing. So personally, I would like it

if we were more well known. And I think I think that's one of the main reasons the board is interested in investing in communications is, so that we can raise our profile a little bit, create a stronger brand. Our website needs to be redesigned, it's quite out of date. And so and our social media could be improved. So yeah, we don't want to advocate in countries at the local level. But if we increase our strength of our brand, that will only help us advocating at the international level, which is where we are probably the most suitable organization to do that, to go to the UN, or to go to the World Intellectual Property Organization makes more sense for an international body that's not tied to a country, right, like us to be having those conversations.

L

Lis Malone 16:34

Now, does your organization do its own fundraising? Or are you funded by the different member organizations? Do they pay some sort of dues? Like what's the what's the, I guess, the monetary structure for you know, where this funding is coming from?

M

Mark Workman 16:56

There's multiple sources. So the one of the main sources would be membership fees. And it's based on a relatively complicated formula that has to do with population and also has to do with the different rankings your country might have from UN agencies. So whether you're a high income, or a low middle income, etc, like there's four different categories that you might find yourself in, and that and then there's a number of delegates that you've received based on your population. And so I won't go into the detail any more than that can frustratingly confusing. But based on that formula, there is a certain membership fee that you're charged each year. And, and then we leave it up to the the organizations within that country to figure out who's going to pay for it. Because it doesn't have to be that they split it down the middle. In Canada, it's CNIB and CCB, they may or may not split it down the middle, it may be that one of them, pays for the membership fee, but still supports CCB's participation, just as an example. So that's, that's one way, we also do recognize that not every organization will be able to pay that. And so there are opportunities for subsidies, and reduced fees and that sort of thing. That's when when fundraising our jet revenue generation tool, well, the other is sponsorship, where some organizations will give beyond their membership fee. And we always are very grateful for that. So there's different levels of of sponsorship, you know, sort of like the silver/gold/platinum app type deal. And so that generates a little bit of revenue as well. And then the third way is projects. So we do partner with different organizations. Right now we've got a couple of partnerships with CBM global. So this is a, an organization CBM used to stand for Christian Blind Mission, they don't really use that anymore. So CBM global is a large international organization that works with groups like the WBU to do different types of projects. And so we've received some funding through them, another one through International Disability Alliance, where we partner with them and have received some grants. So those are more project based funding, so that that's the main way, what we don't do is go out and do fund raisers and like use advertising, use social media, that sort of thing. And it's not something that I've really looked in in depth, but I do know that you know, one of the sensitivities would be, you're now competing with organizations that are members of yours. And so that can get a little a little tricky to balance that.

R

Rob Mineault 19:52

it seems to me that that you guys are in a very unique spot because with your involvement in, in so many different countries, and with so many different organizations globally, you guys must have a really sort of unique picture when it comes to how something like accessibility is really doing on a global level, as opposed to sort of a local level. I mean, you know, a lot of a lot of our local organizations that that are advocates in that space, you know, they have their hands full, just, you know, trying to deal with, you know, city districts and stuff. But you guys are dealing with things on a global level in multiple different countries. Do you guys sort of, you know, record, keep or make note of, you know, the different countries and sort of what their level of accessibility might be comparatively to others? And do you try to sort of, you know, sort of pour more resources into some of the the countries that that may not have the types of resources that say, you know, Canada or the US, for example, might have?

M

Mark Workman 21:00

I would say, yes, we do things, we've done some surveys, around employment to try to get a better picture of what the employment situation is, in different countries. We did a survey near the early on in the pandemic, to understand how COVID was affecting blind people in different countries. And you could sort of break it down a little bit and see the different impacts depending on where you were in the world. Accessibility, I can't quite recall, if we have, it wouldn't surprise me, but I don't think it would be in the recent past that we have. But I will say that accessibility is one of the areas - like I say accessibility and thinking of the way the built environment is designed. That is one of the areas that the World Blind Union has made a priority. And it's partly due to that partnership I mentioned with CBM Global. So we created something called the Global Program for Inclusive and Accessible Urban Development. And I mentioned the World Urban Forum, which just took place in Poland. So a few of us were there. And participating in panels and dialogues, we launched a special issue of a journal on public space. That was where the entire issue is dedicated to accessibility and inclusive design. So we've done some stuff like that. In April, when of a team was down in New York at a, what they call a high level meeting at the United Nations and had a chance to address the General Assembly and talk about accessibility, and that sort of thing. And there were 700 mayors that were present, that were hearing that message. So we do that type of stuff. Now, you know, you might hear that and if you're like me, you might think well, that's all well and good, but like how does going to Poland at this huge international event or going to New York at the United Nations - like how does that actually translate to helping someone in Rio de Janeiro or Nairobi, or something like that? Which is a totally fair question. And the way I think about it is really there, it does need to be a two pronged approach. Like there's a lot of value, I think, from us being in front of these large gatherings, the world urban forum, it had 20,000 people register, I don't think that many actually showed up. But it was definitely you know, 1000s and 1000s of people. And some of them would be city planners or urban developers, like urban planners, some of them would have been mayors and things like that. And so getting a message out in in those types of venues is definitely helpful. But then it really needs to be paired with the second prong, which is like working with our members to so that they understand what messages are we communicating? How can they reinforce those messages at home? How can they advocate in their local communities? And so I think once you're, once you're doing those two, two approaches, then I think you can really see some, some positive differences that are that are made.

R

Ryan Fleury 24:11

So Mark, is there any follow up that's done by, you know, let's say, a local organization, if you've got 700 mayors showing up to a meeting? Is there any follow up to see if they've got more questions or want more information?

M

Mark Workman 24:26

Partly, I think we do need to tackle this question and what we call it as it's the challenge of localization, because we have all of these great international frameworks, where they, they actually set out a lot of really key requirements and recommendations and that sort of thing. But we want to localize it, so we want to translate it into actual change at the ground level. So so the last couple of months have been a bit of a whirlwind travel, but our next step is to to fit down On NC, okay, now we've launched this journal, for example, it's got tons of useful articles information I reviewed, one of the articles here was on shared spaces. So you know, these environments where cars and pedestrians and cyclists are all meant to live together in harmony. And, and it points out a lot of the challenges that blind people experience in these environments. And and so now we've got research, academically peer reviewed research that organizations can start to use. So the question is like, Okay, well, how can we support them? We can't just, you know, here's a link, have at it, right, you know, like, now you've have all you need, I think, instead, what we need to what we are planning to start doing and have started a little bit in other contexts is, especially now that we're much more comfortable with this technology is like different zoom webinars, where we're where we can go through the article, we can sit down and say, Look, we're going to do a webinar on shared space, if this is an issue in your community, join us. And if you can't join us, we'll record and you can find it on our website. And we will walk you through what some of the findings are, what some of the recommendations are. And we can just talk through, like, how can you use this in your local community? So all of that is stuff that we've, like I said, we've started to do some webinars, but we're going to really ramp that type of stuff up.

R

Rob Mineault 26:24

Well, I think that that is such a valuable thing as well be because, you know, if you really think about it, a lot of the local organizations, they have their hands full, just dealing with providing resources and services on a local level, they don't have time to do like wide sweeping surveys, or, or come up with, you know, suggestions for standards or policies and stuff like that. So in a way, you know, that that is, is most certainly helping, like attacking things on that macro level, like somebody really needs to be doing that, and then feeding that to the local organizations that so that they can take that and use that to petition government or say local districts for, for some really, you know, key changes in things like the build environment. So I think that, and I really feel like that's kind of something that that is missing within, I would say, right across the board. In terms of disability, there's, there's just so many different organizations servicing particular populations, that it becomes a little bit overwhelming to really try to navigate that, or to really, really get things done on a on a political level.

M

Mark Workman 27:51

I do think that's right, to the extent that we can build some bridges or get some groups aligned. That's a key role we can play. The other thing that I think that really no other organization is likely to do is to share things that are working well in one part of the world with other parts of

likely to do is to share things that are working well, in one part of the world with other parts of the world. I mean, of course, everyone will go on social media, and they're put up in their websites, and they'll share like all the great work that they're doing, which is great. But like we can play a role of saying, Look, to this organization in this part of the world, you know, we know which problem which challenges you're facing. And we actually know that there were some successes in Canada or the US or, or I don't want to suggest that all the successes are going to come in the Western world, either. It might be that something really great is happening in Bolivia. And we can share that successes from that country, with others around the world. And like I said, I don't think that any other blindness organization is going to take on that role. So that's one that I think we own and like I say that I think we can do better at and I'm hoping that, you know, in the next six months as we really the investments in our communications as they start to pay off, we'll see a lot more of that type of work being done.

R Ryan Fleury 29:14

I have a question for you. I don't know if this falls into your court or not. But recently, there's been talk about the blindness community and car manufacturers and how they want standardized audible signals from these cars. And the manufacturers are kind of putting up their hand saying no, we're gonna do it our own way. And, you know, with traffic congestion with the cuckoo's of the peep, peep so the audible signals we're gonna have hybrid cars, chirping and tweeting and cackling down the roads. Are you guys involved in any of that conversation?

M Mark Workman 29:55

Not so directly. Like do I follow it, I've heard a lot of the conversations and a lot of our members are, it's, again, I have to, I will have to play the new card a couple of times in this assure this conversation. So I wouldn't be surprised if in the past, we had some involvement. You know, one of the questions I would have is, is there any international body that has authority in this area? Or really is it up to the countries and the car manufacturers like the the national governments to make these rules, you'll like it might be national governments. And that's often the case like the international bodies, they set out framework frameworks, they put out recommendations, but it ultimately up to national governments to to adopt those standards or those those recommendations. And that's probably what's happening here. I do, I think, you know, we would probably all want to have something standard across from country to country so that you're not guessing from one country to the other. I was in actually, I was in Poland, and they have some accessible pedestrian signals. And I ended up having I was really fortunate, I had the opportunity to meet with our Polish member there. And we went out for lunch with a few of us. And I was just remarking that, oh, that, like your audible signals are very different. And they said, Yeah, and it they changed from whatever part of the city you're in from one to the other, you'll get different signals. So they're having trouble standardizing them across like, cities. And when I was in New York as well, like it was, it was quite different. And that's, you know, it just makes it a little tricky, because now you have, you're going to a new city, you're used to the cuckoo's and the chirps. And you know what they mean. And you get to a new city, and you're like, okay, it sounds like a machine gun.

L Lis Malone 31:45

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You know, that machine gun sound says it's that, I guess, it's suppose that means it's okay to cross. I'm like that, that signals me duck roll, or, you know, take cover, but I was wondering, like, who comes up with some of these? Like, yeah, machine guns?

M

Mark Workman 32:04

In Poland? It sounds like it would mean speed up. And I thought, that's, geez, you gotta you're like, you're getting close to the end of the cycle. But someone told me know that, like, it starts out quicker. And then it slows down,

L

Lis Malone 32:15

Did a communist country come up with that? Like, the machine guns? Like, move your butt move your butt across the street?

R

Ryan Fleury 32:27

See we need standards.

L

Lis Malone 32:29

Yeah. Well, you know, and we talk about this a lot on this program, that when it comes to getting consensus from the blind community, and I would love to hear, Mark, your perspective on this is that it's the, like, the blind community. I feel like we're like herding cats. You know, we can't agree on anything. We're all going in different directions. We all feel like we there are different priorities and, and different solutions. So I'm just wondering, like, I mean, and that's sometimes just on a more of a, like a national level, but I mean, on a global level, is it? Are you seeing more consensus than what we see on the ground?

M

Mark Workman 33:10

I don't think so someone jokingly said about blind, it's not blind welfare, it's blind warfare. Organizations are, are often fighting against each other. Now, I think, I think it tends to be within country, though, where you will see a lot of that disagreement. So yeah, so like, I haven't had the fortune of attending General Assembly yet. So I'll be looking forward to, to what that looks like and how much consensus there is, my understanding is sometimes there ends up being different blocks that vote together, countries that are, you know, similar in geography, and that sort of thing will, will kind of block together to vote for for certain things, I guess, not something I've experienced, but something that I've heard from speaking to people who have gone so I think it's not unusual for some disagreements, but hopefully, maybe it's maybe it's a little easier for us because we are talking about some of the bigger picture issues and and like it sounds, we can get some consensus on some of that stuff, then the little disagreements can be dealt with within the country. But I don't I don't know. I don't know for sure. It seems to be

like that. The closer you are as a group, the more your disagreements kind of they don't matter as much but they become much more important to you to to differentiate yourself from the other group. We see that definitely hear in Canada my experience.

R

Ryan Fleury 34:45

So in the US they have the ADA in Canada, we have a framework for an Accessible Canada Act. What does that look like around the world? Are there other acts in place or standards in countries that are looking at the different acts and implementing their own?

M

Mark Workman 35:05

There are. And some of them have been in place for a while, I used to study this a little bit back when I was in university. So I know for example that the UK had one kind of in the 90s. Australia had one quite a long time ago. But the European Union is just about to it's either I don't have the details at my fingertips, but it's either just about to come out or just recently did come up. And my sense, again, for not having studied this one in depth is that it's probably going to be one of the stronger ones, it's probably going to go beyond the ADA. So we might see. And because it's affecting such a large swath of the population, like all of Europe, it will probably have positive impacts for us, in the same way that I think we've benefited from ADA, existing, you know, nearly 30 years before Canada finally passed. So yeah, I think we're seeing we're seeing some there. I've heard other countries talk about it. My view, it's crucial. Like I we're in the challenge of being in Canada, where it's a very decentralized country that like we don't we not only need one in at the Federal level, we every province really needs to have right, as well. And unfortunately, Alberta doesn't yet. Hopefully, that will happen. But But yeah, it's something that I think is super important. One of the like, short phrases we use that I kind of come back to it and helps guide our thinking about stuff is accessibility is a precondition for inclusion. So what we mean by that is like, you can have all of the great attitudes about disability and want to be very inclusive and have, you know, all the best intentions. But if you don't have accessibility, you're not going to have a solution. You just can't. People need to be able to get around their environments, they need to be able to use websites and things like that, in order for there to ever be inclusion. And so accessibility legislation, I think it's like a another really crucial piece of the puzzle. As I say that, I think the Europe one is one to watch, and to see if they are able to go beyond the ADA, which was great in 1990. But it doesn't include it didn't really conceive of the internet. And so I think, yeah, I'll be very interested to see what that one ends up looking like and does it end up resulting in some some positive changes for for actually the rest of the world?

R

Rob Mineault 37:39

So when you're, when you're dealing with so many different countries, how often does cultural differences come into play, in terms of interacting with, with the different organizations because, you know, every country sort of sees disability in a different way?

M

Mark Workman 38:00

Again, just with me being relatively new, I don't have a tons of experience, but I was just in a

Again, just with me being relatively new, I don't have a ton of experience, but I was just in a workshop that was organized by the International Disability Alliance. And we had a session on intersectionality, for example. And that's, I think, a concept that we're becoming more familiar with, here in Canada, and in probably largely Western countries. So the idea that different parts of your identity might intersect in different ways and create unique circumstances. We put up people in my group, we broke up into small groups, and the people in my group one was from the Arab organization of persons with disabilities. And she said, like, I don't, I've never heard this concept, we have no idea what this means it wouldn't really resonate with our, our folks. So there's just like, a different perspective on things. And I don't think there was a hostility to the concept or anything, but it was just it was very foreign and new concept to to this individual. And I think, I think we could see other situations like that, you know, attitudes towards women are different in different parts of the world, attitudes towards disability and, and being sort of out there and independent is a little different in different parts of the world. So it's something that I'm anticipating being not a not a problem, but just a fact that we need to be sensitive to and aware of, and not to, you know, I when I when I got the job I said during the interview, like one of the issues is that like I am a white dude from an affluent country who is like heterosexual and cisgender and all of this stuff and like, and now I'm dealing with lots of people whose situations and struggles I can't easily identify with. I grew up relatively poor in Canada. But still relatively poor in Canada,, it can be quite wealthy compared to poor in South Sudan, or places like that. And so I was I tried to be sensitive that like, not to impose or just think I have all the answers or anything like that. And to recognize that people may be at different stages in their journey, even my thinking about disability evolved big time from, like, in large, I would say, through my, through my education before I went to school, and before I started volunteering with advocacy organizations, my attitude was like, most people's was pretty negative, about disability and blindness. And it really evolved through exposure to different blind people and through exposure to different blindness organizations. And in my case, through academic academia, as well made a big influence on me. And so people's, you know, attitudes and things like that can evolve, and it's just about understanding where people are at and providing information and that sort of thing. So, yeah, I haven't experienced a ton of it. But I do think it will be something to be aware of, especially at our next General Assembly, for example, where you, where you do have hundreds of people from all over the world coming together.

R

Rob Mineault 41:15

Yeah, I mean, it really is fascinating. Because even just knowing what what I know, which isn't a lot, let's be honest. But it seems to me that, you know, just because a country is a developing nation, it's not a one to one where the more affluent nations have better views on disability, because really wealth has nothing to do with it. It's more of a, it's more of a cultural thing, you could certainly have a developing nation, that has an amazing view on disability, they treat people with disabilities very well. It's just that the country itself doesn't have a ton of money to throw it at disability resources. So I mean, that must be a really fascinating sort of mosaic to try to knit together under this one big umbrella.

M

Mark Workman 42:11

Yeah, and the only thing I would add to that, I mean, what your comment makes me think of it's like, some countries are a bit more about community than I think we are in, in some Western countries where we tend to be a bit more individualistic, and about the rights of the individual

and independence, as opposed to things like community and interdependence and mutual dependence. And, and that kind of thing. I do think, personally, like, I think we could use a little more of that. I understand why our, our countries have sort of developed in that way. And communities, communities can be oppressive, for sure. Right. But, but also, I just I worry sometimes that if we're too individualistic, and atomize, this a word we would sometimes philosophy, like, we're just these different atoms all floating around on our own, that that's a problem too, and we may miss out. I know, in my own, like, personal life, I've volunteered with our community League, with the hope of trying to create more of a sense of community in the neighborhood. And I think other countries, ones that may be a little bit maybe developing or a little bit less well off, they may also be really strong places for communities and support each other as as communities rather than kind of letting each individual kind of fend for themselves.

R

Rob Mineault 43:36

Yeah, that's a really good point. I mean, I think I would, I would almost argue that wealthy countries are actually a lot worse at some of their attitudes, because because of that very thing of that lack of community, or have this attitude that sort of, I got mine, So now get off your butt and go get yours.

M

Mark Workman 43:56

Yeah, rather than we're gonna work together and try to make it so that we all succeed.

R

Ryan Fleury 44:01

Well, it's not on the same level, but you know, look what COVID taught us right? There were a lot of people with disabilities who weren't able to get out and get groceries who were left in the cold. Nobody was checking in on them, you know, that community was needed.

R

Rob Mineault 44:14

And actually, that's a that's an interesting segue, Ryan, because I did want to ask about - you did mention that a COVID survey was sort of one of the one of the more recent surveys that you you did, what were your findings around COVID, and just how that impacted sort of the global disability community.

M

Mark Workman 44:35

One kind of interesting finding was the top issue, and wasn't the only issue but the top issue that people cited that had been impacted was around transportation and mobility. And so like, if you might if you'd asked me before, I might have thought it would be something around health care. Maybe isolation or things like that, which you know, transportation mobility is connected, but that was the most common issue cited. And I think it does make some sense in that blind people rely very heavily on the public transportation system. And that was radically altered during the pandemic, in some cases, it was shut down altogether, or it was services

were significantly cut back. We even heard examples of like, people were now being asked to board the back of the bus. But that wasn't super intuitive, or there's, you know, only certain seats you can sit in, but they're not marked. And, you know, other than, like, visual ways and that sort of thing. So, we heard a lot about transportation and mobility as sort of the main issue, which again, it makes some sense once you once you think about how dependent we are and reliant, we are on on that for getting around and how kind of governments and decision makers were fairly quick to, to eliminate that. So that that was one thing. The other kind of interesting thing to come out of it is that it really showed us that governments and decision makers didn't really factor in blindness when they were making a lot of their decisions. So I think you know, some of the examples around those markers for telling people how to walk in stores and things like that, like that. That's not helpful to someone who can't see, there were things like issues around physical distancing, and guide dogs really having a hard time with that. Like, I personally didn't experience any major issues. But I heard enough people who, who did where people were quite upset with them, because they weren't like physically distancing, and that sort of thing. So we kind of realized that I mean, and even even test, for example, the rapid tests, I had to do once totally inaccessible process. And like, none of that had to be that way. Like you could have made an accessible test, there's no doubt in my mind, if you had just put in a little thought into it. And governments could have come up with better policies, if they had consulted with organizations of persons with disabilities as part of the process. And one of the reason I mentioned all that is because it's sort of, I think there's a new way of thinking about some of these issues. So you've probably heard nothing about us without us, a very common rallying cry for the disability community. And I think it served us very well. Because for a long time, people would make decisions for us without talking to us. And so nothing about us without us made a lot of sense. But I think we're kind of realizing that everything's about us, you know, what if it's a pandemic response, it's not, it's not specifically about disability, but we're affected if it's climate change. Now, that's not a disability issue, specifically, but we are definitely affected by climate change in unique ways conflict in Ukraine, there's, you know, again, people with disabilities are disproportionately impacted. And so there's nothing about us without us really has to evolve to nothing without us. It doesn't have quite the same ring to it. But I think the thinking behind it is right, which is like whether you're talking disaster emergency plans, COVID response, Climate Change Response, like all of these things, people with disabilities need to be at the table to avoid what we saw happen during the pandemic, where all of the a lot of the decisions had negative impacts on people with disabilities, and they didn't have to.

R

Rob Mineault 48:31

Yeah, very good point. I'm probably wasn't a nation on earth that didn't screw the pooch on that one. Because, you know, a lot of times, those COVID policies came into effect so fast, they had to really act fast. They just didn't, they didn't take the time to really think about it. And I mean, I can even think of another example. What was that? Can Arrive app was, you know, was was mandated? And it wasn't accessible?

M

Mark Workman 49:04

I'm like, will give a pass on some things like you do have to move quickly. In some cases, I would say like, you, ideally, would have started to think about some of the stuff before. ArriveCan I bet you if they had just involved some blind people in testing it or if they'd gone to

organizations that provide accessibility consultant I bet you they could have they could have done it. But I mean, I do agree that some in some cases, they did move very quickly. And, and that's a challenge and but that's a lesson learned is like, okay, let's, while we're not in a pandemic, which I know we still are, but while we're not, you know, while we're not in the middle of a disaster, let's make sure that our plans are including people with disabilities.

R

Rob Mineault 49:49

I think that it's that sort of an indicator, though of a problem in the way of thinking because even if you do have to act fast, they just didn't even think of it. Like the fact that it didn't even enter their minds to go Okay, wait, what about, you know, the disability community? You know, that's, I think that that's the hurdle that we sort of have to overcome. They just, they just have to that has to enter their minds, whenever they're they're developing policy.

R

Ryan Fleury 50:22

But on the flip side, you know, we've had this conversation on the show before where the disability group is so vast and so diverse. So it's not just talking blindness, we're talking autistic, we're talking dyslexic, we're talking whatever your disability, you know, that's a huge demographic, and to bring everybody to the table. I'm not saying isn't possible, but at a large undertaking.

M

Mark Workman 50:50

It's true that proper engagement isn't easy. I don't think it's I don't think it's particularly complicated, like we know what to do. But it does require a commitment. It does require time, which, you know, in some cases, they don't have the time. And it does require some resources. Like, if you're going to do a proper consultation, you'll have to have a budget for sign language interpretation, you'll have to find a venue that's accessible, you'll have to ensure that blind people can get there relatively easily on public transit, you might have to produce some alternative formats. So that like, there are there are expenses associated with it. So I don't want to suggest it's easy, but I also don't think it's particularly complicated and anything that can't be done.

R

Rob Mineault 51:40

Yeah, and I mean, I really think that, you know, at the end of the day, really all it requires just having some accessibility consultants around that, you know, can raise the red flag when, when something like ArriveCan gets developed, you know, just all it takes is one guy in one meeting to be like, Oh, hey, incidentally, we should probably make that accessible.

M

Mark Workman 52:01

That's one reason why it really does help for organizations to employ people with disabilities. They are much more likely to be responsive, and if you're a government to your citizens, but even if you're just a business to your customers. If some of the employees can flag

citizens, but even if you're just a business to your customers. If some of the employees can pay things that you know that your customers will be affected by yet another good reason to, to employ people.

R

Ryan Fleury 52:30

So originally, I wanted to have you on Mark, during the time of the Concert For Ukraine, the We're With U concert. And unfortunately, you were traveling, and that just didn't work out. But where did that fundraiser end up? And what is happening with Ukraine and the blind.

M

Mark Workman 52:48

Yeah, and maybe I'll back up briefly and just give a little context around the concert. So the invasion happened when Russia invaded Ukraine about a month after I joined the organization. And so it was not something that I had put in my 90 day plan, and not something that I was really well prepared for. So I ended up having a lot of conversations with different people, people were reaching out to us asking how they could assist, how they could help. And being so new, I really wasn't sure what we could do. But eventually, we settled on creating a fund. So designating a basically a line item in our accounting, such that any money going to it would be designated for a specific purpose. And I'll be totally frank, I thought we would raise 5, 10,000. Through this fund, and as it turned out, this concert idea had come up totally independently, totally separately from us developing or designating the fund. And Mark Riccobono was played a real leadership role. That's the president of the National Federation of the Blind, and reached out and kind of said, Okay, well, we've got this concert happening, and we've got this Fund, the World Blind Union, let's see if we can marry the two together. And, and we met with the organizers of the concert, and they were very supportive. They thought, yeah, it makes good sense for an organization like World Blind Union, to be the sort of recipients. I mean, the funnel because we're not receiving any of the funds. And so that ended up being agreed to, that the concert would go ahead, and then all proceeds raised would go to the World Blind Union's Ukrainian Unity Fund, and that took place on April 16. I don't know if if anyone had a chance to listen, I listened the whole the whole time and thought it was a really powerful moving experience. Just hearing all the different voices is participating on social media, though really the whole blind community across the world coming together in support of those in Ukraine who are blind and partially sighted. And so that day alone, it was, you know, somewhere in the \$80,000 kind of raised. Altogether, we're at well over \$100,000 US, I don't have the latest numbers, I put it somewhere between 115,000 or 120,000 that was raised through that. And so that a lot more than I initially planned, which is good. I mean, it means that we have more money to provide and support, but it's daunting as well, because it's a lot of money and a lot of responsibility. And we want to make sure we provide it in ways that have the most positive impact, and help the people. So where we stand at the moment is there are some legal issues, they're not like, major barriers or anything, but as a registered charity in Canada, we can't easily just say, Take this 100,000. So you, okay, you can have 50, you can have 50. There are just rules around Canadian charities giving money to other countries. And so we're setting up some agreements, we're hoping to keep them as as relatively informal as possible, so that there's not a huge burden around reporting and all of that stuff. But at the same time, we want to balance that with also respecting people's donated money and trying to make sure it gets to the place that it needs. So trying to find that balance. So I've been in conversation with a number of organizations that are in Ukraine, or in surrounding countries like Poland, or there's a person in Finland, who has a charity that I've been in contact with. And so we've identified the

organization's at least some organizations. And we're in the process of setting up some memorandums of understanding with them. And the intention is to provide small ish amounts of funding, and kind of see how it works. How well does it work? Does it get to where it needs to go, you know, how, how quickly is it spanned, and then we can provide additional funding based on those, we could call them pilots that we're going to do. Since then we've also actually heard from our member in Ukraine, and that that actually was something we hadn't done. Since 2015, we hadn't really had contact with our Ukrainian member since 2015. And even I mentioned earlier, we have regions. So one of our regions is the European Blind Union. And even they hadn't heard from Ukraine since 2020. So before the war, but since then, our member has reached out to both organizations, both WBU and European Blind Union, and look asking for some support. So we're, we're going to be able to provide them with some financial assistance, as well. So really, we are still collecting some of the funds. The National Federation of the Blind, just recently sent a check up to Canada, with the funds that they had collected, I'll be going there tomorrow. And I'm hoping that all tests are negative and can participate in some of the ceremonies there tomorrow. If not, then I'll probably just do it virtually. But but once like, so we now collected a lot of the funds. Once those memorandums of understanding are established, then we'll start to send wire transfers, bank transfers to different organizations. And we'll be very transparent on where it's going and what the money is being used for and sharing updates as we can on social media and the website.. So that's sort of where we stand, I guess one other thought comes to mind is we're also hoping to use some portion of the of the funds. In my view, it's going to be a relatively small portion, so maybe 15% 10 15%, towards longer term advocacy. So what I mean by that, and these are just examples, but like, could we do a video on how to make an access to a refugee center, accessible to someone who's blind? Or is there a series of podcasts we could do in different languages on how to help blind people when they're in these types of war zones? So it would it would benefit people in Ukraine, but it would also hopefully have some longer term benefits down the road when unfortunately, we know conflicts like this are going to happen again. So some smallish portion, I think will be used for longer term advocacy, as well. So that's sort of where we're where we're at right now.

R

Ryan Fleury 1:00:01

Great. And so if people wanted to donate to that fund, is that still open?

M

Mark Workman 1:00:06

It is still open. Yep. So on our website, there's a CanadaHelps or a PayPal donation option and either whichever one you click, there's a way to specify that you want your donation going to Ukrainian Unity Fund. So that is still an option. And of course anyone in Canada, we are a registered charity, so you would get a tax receipt and could get an advantage of any tax credits and things like that as well.

R

Rob Mineault 1:00:33

And what's the website that if people want to go there?

M

Mark Workman 1:00:37

I know the short version we have is www.wbu.ngo.

R

Rob Mineault 1:00:47

Perfect and well, we will make sure that we include a link in our show notes as well. Perfect. Mark, we want to thank you so much for for troopering through this episode. I'm sure we could probably talk to you for another two hours, but I'm sure you're probably ready for a nap at this point.

M

Mark Workman 1:01:06

It's been a lot of fun.

R

Rob Mineault 1:01:08

But listen, we're happy to have you come back one day as well. I think it'd be great to heck, we could just have a whole episode on the Marrakesh treaty. Just that alone, because that's there's a there's a lot there to unpack as well. But listen, best of luck and thank you for all the work that the organization is doing.

M

Mark Workman 1:01:30

Thank you so much for having me. I really appreciate the opportunity. And I have thoroughly enjoyed the chat. So happy to join you guys.

R

Rob Mineault 1:01:37

Awesome. Great.

R

Ryan Fleury 1:01:38

Thanks. Thanks so much, Mark.

R

Rob Mineault 1:01:46

All right. Well, I have to tell you so much has happened since Mark left. For those people who are curious for a behind the scenes peek at the AT Banter podcast. So while we were saying goodbye to Mark, the power in Lis's house went out. And so she's not here but guess who arrived in the middle of the interview? It's none other than Mr. Steve Barclay.

S

Steve Barclay 1:02:14

Steve Barclay 1:02:17
Where? Where?

R Ryan Fleury 1:02:19
You owe us a banter banter, because we didn't have it at the top.

S Steve Barclay 1:02:21
Oh, let me catch up banter banter banter banter.

R Rob Mineault 1:02:25
See I bet you didn't even know that you don't listen to shows whenever you're not here. It's like the fallen pilot formation. Whenever I say at banter, there's just a big pause. So it's like, it's like leaving an empty chair for a fallen comrade. So in any case, for the outro here, we'll have no Lis. But Steve is here. So there you go.

S Steve Barclay 1:02:59
We traded.

R Rob Mineault 1:03:01
No, that's a really that's a really interesting organization. And the more that, that I listened to Mark talk, I have to say that it's, it's kind of crucial, like, we really do need work done at that macro level. Because really, if you think about it, local organizations don't have the time or the resources or anything else to really work on things at those higher levels.

S Steve Barclay 1:03:25
And it's it's interesting to hear how different organizations from around the world interact too, you know, how they have different different takes on different different aspects? I'm sure their meetings are probably just fascinating to sit in on.

R Rob Mineault 1:03:42
Oh, absolutely. I mean, it's, it's so weird, you put any, any amount of human beings in a room together, and it will inevitably turn into like a power struggle and politics involved, which is a little bit frustrating, right? Like, even you know, when we know, even here in Canada, you know, we have a few blindness organizations, and we won't name any names, but, you know, I don't think many of them actually get along very well together, or at least I haven't heard of them getting along.

R Ryan Fleury 1:04:12
Well, I think they get along, you know, they're you can be members of multiple agencies as well. So I, I don't know, at some point, somebody probably didn't agree.

R Rob Mineault 1:04:24
But for a lot of them, I feel like the you know, they're also fighting over limited resources in ways so, you know, that's gonna automatically sort of set them at odds.

R Ryan Fleury 1:04:37
Well, what does the government do the government standing on the outside looking and going, Okay, well, this agency saying this, this one saying this, this one saying this, like, get on the same page, and maybe we'll talk? I don't know.

R Rob Mineault 1:04:49
But then you multiply that on a global level and you have all these different cultures and countries coming together. Like that's just it's got to be such a challenge. I forgot to ask them like how big the actual organization is in terms of like just how many staff that they have staff and volunteers because they must be huge because to try to juggle all of this. I mean, that's quite the undertaking.

R Ryan Fleury 1:05:15
So lots of volunteers.

R Rob Mineault 1:05:18
Yeah, they're, they're better humans. And so we can barely produce a weekly podcast without somebody dropping out.

S Steve Barclay 1:05:29
Or dropping in.

R Rob Mineault 1:05:31
We have drop ins dropouts, we've got a dead rat, in the walls of Ryan's studio. All kinds of kinds of nonsense going on. Oh, hey, that reminds me sir. Did you get through to your bank?

S Steve Barclay 1:05:46
I finally got through here.

R Rob Mineault 1:05:48
So how long were you on hold for?

S Steve Barclay 1:05:51
Little over an hour? That's not bad trying to get through to Visa.

R Rob Mineault 1:05:55
Yeah. But Visa you think you know, come on. I just hate phone trees. Now. I just hate phones. I don't want to do it.

S Steve Barclay 1:06:04
I hate the message we are dealing with higher than normal call volume.

R Ryan Fleury 1:06:08
It's just a standard line now. Right?

S Steve Barclay 1:06:10
I know. I know. And it has no bearing in reality.

R Ryan Fleury 1:06:15
We'll get to you when we're ready.

R Rob Mineault 1:06:16
And talk about legislating standards, can we please get some standards in place where it is if you put somebody if you put me in a hold or sort of hold you, you are not allowed to like play the same really bad piece of music over and over and over? Like there should be you need to

have at least six different songs. They have to be like no, no light, light jazz versions of Police songs.

R

Ryan Fleury 1:06:49

Some of them or at least some of them are giving you the option for callbacks now, so you don't have to sit on hold and go about your business.

R

Rob Mineault 1:06:55

Occasionally. Yeah, but then you know, you're gonna miss that call. That will happen. You'll just be in the bathroom or something and be like God dammit. Anyways? Well, I guess all that's left is for the three amigos to do our outro here. It's been a while since we it's just been we got to have to recalibrate now with Lis going. Okay, so let me see if I remember how this works. Hey, Ryan. Yes, Rob? Where can people find us?

R

Ryan Fleury 1:07:34

They can find us at www.atbanter.com

R

Rob Mineault 1:07:37

See, it really was just like riding a bike. Just fall right back into the habit.

R

Ryan Fleury 1:07:42

Who needs Lis.

R

Rob Mineault 1:07:44

That's right. Who does needs Lis?

R

Ryan Fleury 1:07:50

Jk jk.

R

Rob Mineault 1:07:59

Don't talk smack about Lis because she actually listens to the show. You can't get away with anything with her. Jk Lis, jk, jk

R Ryan Fleury 1:08:13
She keeps you accountable.

R Rob Mineault 1:08:14
That's right. And she remembers everything too. Yeah, she never forgets. So. Hey, where am I?
They can also drop us an email if they so desire at cowbell@atbanter.com.

S Steve Barclay 1:08:31
Yeah, you know what else they can do? Well, they can just go and find us on Twitter or Facebook.

R Ryan Fleury 1:09:29
That's true. That's right. Yeah.

R Rob Mineault 1:09:39
All right. That is going to about do it for us this week. Big thanks to everybody who dropped in and dropped out. Of course big thanks to Mark workman for joining us and we will see everybody next week.