

AT Banter Podcast Episode 295 - Connect 4 Life

📅 Mon, 7/25 4:02PM ⌚ 59:34

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

disability, people, organizations, programs, conversations, advocacy, individuals, connect, life, hear, services, advocating, learn, understand, resources, province, mental health, living, talk, podcast

SPEAKERS

Rob Mineault, Melanie Taddeo, Ryan Fleury

R Rob Mineault 00:18
Hey and welcome to another episode of AT Banter.

R Ryan Fleury 00:24
Banter, banter.

R Rob Mineault 00:26
Oh, we got a banter, banter.

R Ryan Fleury 00:29
Well, I figured with two people away, it would be really long if we left the empty space there.

R Rob Mineault 00:35
Yes. So this is of course, the podcast where we talk with advocates and members of the disability community to educate and inspire better conversation about disability. Hey, my name is Rob Mineault. And joining me today, Mr. Ryan Fleury.

R Ryan Fleury 00:55
Good afternoon.

R Rob Mineault 00:57
The loneliest employee of Canadian Assistive Technology,

R Ryan Fleury 01:02
The happiest?

R Rob Mineault 01:03
Oh, well, yeah, that's true.

R Ryan Fleury 01:04
The bosses away mice can play.

R Rob Mineault 01:08
That's true. Yes. So as we mentioned at the top of the show, only two of us, just me and Ryan today because Mr. Steve Barclay is, of course away on vacation, and so is Lis Malone.

R Ryan Fleury 01:25
Well deserved vacations.

R Rob Mineault 01:27
Well, I'm assuming so. I mean, you would you would have a better idea of whether or not Steve deserved the vacation or not.

R Ryan Fleury 01:34
Yeah, no, he, he definitely deserves some time away, for sure.

R Rob Mineault 01:38
All right. Well, we'll give it to him. Who knows about Lis though?

R Ryan Fleury 01:41
Well, you know, she bailed on us on a couple of our last episodes. Right. She's just boom gone.

R Rob Mineault 01:48
Yeah, that's right. I think she went to Lake Tahoe, is that right?

R Ryan Fleury 01:53
Where there's two places she was going.

R Rob Mineault 01:55
I think it was San Francisco and Lake Tahoe. I wonder if they're having a heatwave there. I don't know. Every place seems to be having a heatwave except us. But I'm not complaining.

R Ryan Fleury 02:09
Wait till tomorrow. It's supposed get hot tomorrow.

R Rob Mineault 02:14
Well, this has been the weather update. Always, I mean, but that's you know what that's another side effect of climate change. We're gonna talk about the weather a lot. I mean, this is it's a thing. It's not a cliché. We have to talk about the weather because it's it's absolutely terrible in most places.

R Ryan Fleury 02:35
I live in a bunker.

R Rob Mineault 02:37
Yeah, that's true. Hey, speaking of your bunker, is how are things down there in the guitar dungeon? Any more rodents or anything? Are you all good down there?

R Ryan Fleury 02:47
So far so good. Time will tell though.

R Rob Mineault 02:52
And no. no bubonic plaque or anything?

...and no, no vaccine program or anything.

R Ryan Fleury 02:54
No, not yet.

R Rob Mineault 02:56
Feeling feverish?

R Ryan Fleury 02:57
Nope. Feeling good.

R Rob Mineault 02:59
All right. Well, good. Well, I'm just excited for the show. Sounds like we're both full of energy. And given that, why don't we let the cat out of the bag and tell the lovely people at home what the heck we're doing.

R Ryan Fleury 03:15
So this week, the guest who has joined us is Melanie Taddeo, who is the Executive Director and Founder of Connect 4 Life. Welcome, Melanie.

M Melanie Taddeo 03:25
Thanks so much for having me, guys.

R Ryan Fleury 03:26
Thanks for being here.

R Rob Mineault 03:29
Well, why don't we start by just giving us a little bit of a an insight into who you are, and maybe a little bit about about Connect 4 Life and how it started?

M Melanie Taddeo 03:41
Okay, absolutely. So I want you to picture this growing up. I know you guys all dreamt to be an

astronaut, a police officer, whatever. For me, it was always a teacher. I was a little girl from the classroom, watching my bedroom with my stuffed animals teaching everything possible. That was my dream. And then I found my passion of art. In high school, I went to university to study art to become an art teacher. Great, right. Except, I suffered a massive stroke that left me completely paralyzed left side and legally blind at the age of 21. My life was turned upside down. And I acquired a disability that I knew nothing about a world I knew nothing about. But everybody kept saying it's okay, you're disabled, you can stay home now. No, no, no, no, that's not gonna happen. Again, I learned a lot over the next I'd say three to five years about advocating for yourself finding out what I could and couldn't do see, I had what I call stroke brain. That's not a medical term. It's a Melanie term. It's when you think you can do everything but really you can't. So I had to find a push the limits learn about myself rediscover my abilities. And I went out there and became In the first legally blind teacher to graduate in Ontario. Now this is, of course, dating myself because it was many years ago. But nobody would hire me. I was heartbroken. I had learned to adjust living my life as a woman who happened to be blind, as well as you know, get my independence back. But no one let me fulfill my dream. But I met so many great individuals with various disabilities on my journey. And they kept saying, we want to be independent, we want to be independent, like you can, wow. So I thought outside the box, and I started Kinect for life, partially to help those that wanted to get their dependents but also partially did fulfill my dream to be able to teach and inspire others to achieve their goals. So that's how Connect 4 Life came to be.

R

Rob Mineault 05:46

The whole idea of advocacy, and especially advocating for yourself, I feel like that is such an important skill. When you are faced with a disability, whether it's one that you were born with, or especially if it's something if it's if it's one that you acquire later in life, advocating for yourself isn't really easy for some people. Can you can you speak a little bit about about how your sort of personal journey helped you sort of ease into this world of advocacy and how you sort of spun that out into, into what you're doing with Connect 4 Life?

M

Melanie Taddeo 06:24

Absolutely. So I remember being in the rehab hospital, and it's telling them, I'm gonna go back and move out on my own right away, again, that stroke brain popped up. But they kept saying, no, you need to move home with your parents, you need to do this, you telling me what I need to do. And I am determined, I said, my father would say I'm stubborn, but let's face it, determination sounds much nicer. But I realized, even advocating with my family and the medical staff, I needed to speak up, I needed to have a voice. But I was afraid because I was so dependent on them at that point in my life. But as I started to get out there and start to talk to people I was watching, it was like an art form for me, especially for individuals that I come across, not acquiring the disability later, like, but we're born with it. And they had it down to a science. They were great. They were adamant, passionate, but yet respectfully done. You know, of course, you see everybody that you know, stomps her feet raises their voices in the real world. Of course, that's not gonna get you far, maybe if you're a toddler, but not as an adult. But then these individuals were just so eloquent. And they were clear and concise. And it was amazing what they could do. So I really started to practice the art of advocating for myself just like that. Now, I'll tell you, there were some times it wasn't very effective, and you learn from your mistakes. But what I designed for our program for Connect 4 Life was how to effectively advocate for yourself in any area, because let's face it, whether you're dealing with

an employer, in the education field, or even just, it's your own family, you need to be able to advocate and ask for what you need in order to get that effectively, but yet control your own journey. Because that's the other thing I love. People feel that individuals with disabilities need the help they need people, and really, truly, everybody needs somebody. But we are so able to do things on our own, that sometimes we need to have a kid so people are aware of the boundaries.

R

Ryan Fleury 08:30

So 27 years ago, when I lost my sight, there weren't a lot of resources available, and I had a lot of the same attitudes, you're gonna have to go home and live with your parents. And you know, at that time, I wasn't living with my parents, so that wasn't an option. And so I can understand the frustration, the the was striving to be independent on your own, spread your wings and try to break down some of the barriers and it is a frustrating experience, trying to find somebody who will open a door for you and and give you that motivation, that encouragement, that competence that you can move forward.

M

Melanie Taddeo 09:11

Again, I lost my eyesight twenty seven years ago ago as well, actually this week, believe it or not, and it was mind boggling the lack of resources that provided motivation to be independent. There's so many great resources out there, but not that focus on skill development to gain that independence or regain that independence. So that's why Connect 4 Life for me was so important. I wasn't trying to copy any organization. I wanted to be unique in the sense that we offer people the tools they needed, but their own decisions of telling me what they needed so that they could then achieve their goals.

R

Rob Mineault 09:47

And it also must be really difficult too because, you know when when people go through this, this process of say losing their vision, for example. There's so much going on it It's not just a matter of they need to be sort of retrained in terms of other skills or learn how to sort of navigate the world under these new conditions, but they're also going through a grieving process. And you know, there's, there's counseling, and all of that type of thing can be really, really hard to go through all at the same time. Do you find that you you're sort of helping support people through those types of situations as well?

M

Melanie Taddeo 10:31

Oh, yes, absolutely. And it's so funny, because everybody grieves differently, whether you know, it's grieving for the person you were before. But getting to that stage of acceptance is a journey on their own. So you have to provide them those resources, whether it's through counseling, or peer support, but really just even being there for a conversation about what does this look like? Why is it not going the way I want it to? I want it now. Okay, I totally get it. I wanted it back then the next day, but I wouldn't have been come the individual I am today, if I

had taken the shortcut, not going through the journey. So really having those conversations with people is a big part of what we do. And really spending the time and acknowledging that everybody's journey is different.

R

Rob Mineault 11:16

So in that sense, like, do you guys have mentoring programs? How important is building building like sort of a network of support, and having mentors involved, how important is that in the programs?

M

Melanie Taddeo 11:28

Well, the beautiful thing about our organization, first of all, we're small, it's a grassroots organization, but it's run by individuals with disabilities. So we get it, we have the lived experience, we bring our knowledge. So all of the members of our main core individuals have had lived experiences, whether from birth or acquired later in life, they act as mentors. But then we also have our board of directors, which is combination of both individuals with disabilities and other people with extra talent in certain areas that we don't have expertise in. And they come and they share their knowledge with us. But yet, everybody that is a mentor, obviously has that lived experience to be there to listen to help from the programs. And we have just last year, launched our Connect 4 Wellness program, which is all about mental health, because coping with mental health, when you have a disability is very different than everything else they're talking about, because you have it in other areas. It's not just the pandemic, it's not just loss, it's so much more than that. And so it's been a really great program to have a safe space for everybody come and just say, I'm struggling, what do I do? And it's been an amazing journey the last year and a half on this.

R

Rob Mineault 12:43

So how frustrating is it to sort of know that we really don't have enough resources and services and organizations like yours out there to really fill the need that's, that's out there?



13:06

Oh, it is so frustrating. We are continuously because we're not funded. We are solely on donations and fundraising. You know, yes, you get the odd grant here and there, but that's not long standing. But it's the passion, the dedication of our many volunteers to keep it going. If I could, my dream would to have a Connect 4 Life in every province. Yes, we really are focused on Ontario. But if somebody comes to me from another province, I'm going to help them to best my ability from where they are. Even, you know, maybe it's not about actual programs in their province, but that lived experience that conversation we just had about advocacy, that stuff we can help because it's right across the country, it doesn't matter at that stuff that we can just share. But I'd have one in every province province would be my dream.

R

Rob Mineault 13:55

Well, you know, it's interesting, you know, we often we talked to a lot of organizations on the podcast, you know, because because our one of our mandates here is to try to, you know, give different organizations around the country a bit of a spotlight, because it can be really overwhelming to try to find services in, say, your given province. Because there's just there's so many really, really small grassroots organizations out there that are doing amazing work, but they're not big enough to really necessarily make them selves easy to find. And there really doesn't seem to be any really sort of central hub of like a listing of every single different organization in every province. Do you kind of see that as a bit of a problem?



14:44

Yes, absolutely. You know, all the big organizations that CNIB, the March of Dimes, are amazing they've been around for so long people know them. That's a household name. When you ask, even like in Ontario, do you know Connect 4 Life? Who am I? I've been working on this for eight years, and as much as you can do promotional social media, on websites, etc, etc, going on and talking and doing. So, you know, outreach to all these organizations, it only goes so far, especially if it's a small team. So having a social hub will be essential. And certainly, that would definitely be warranted in all provinces, as well as across Canada. And I know, there's been a couple of attempts, definitely in Ontario of these different listings, but people don't know these listings exist, what good are they?

R

Rob Mineault 14:46

Yeah, and the challenge is, is that, you know, the organizations that are big enough to be on people's radars, you know, so let's see, the CNIBs, the CCBs. I mean, they're all great. They're all doing, you know, really great work. But they're also, you know, overtaxed. I don't know what it's like in Ontario, but I know, certainly, in BC, talking to people in the blindness community here, they don't always get the services that they need in in a timely manner. It's a common frustration for people to just not be able to, to get access to things like orientation and mobility in the time that in the timeframe that they need, or to get even, like, special niche services that, that their particular condition might require. So you know, we need all of these different organizations, I think. But it's just, it's yeah, it's just getting the word out there, it can be really challenging. And for the people who are, who are out there searching, having no place to go, other than to just Google and hope for the best. I mean, that's, that's just so not ideal. That's right. And I remember what my again, many years ago, but when my parents, we knew nothing about disability at all, let alone where to look for resources. And nobody was offering information. You know, yes, CNIB came into the hospital. And that was great. But I was in a rehab hospital to learn to walk again. And I was the youngest person at 21. Everybody else was seniors. And they couldn't provide the support that I needed to rejuvenate my life, talk about careers, talk about marriage, talk about those sorts of things that I still wanted to achieve, because most of the clientele had already been through all that. So it was really that gap. And that's where I was like, okay, we need to really designed programs that best meet people where they are not what we think they need. Even another problem with CNIB is that, you know, they can only do so much. They they they have limited resources as well, because really, you know, somebody who has gone through vision loss, they have a variety of different needs, from from mental health needs, right through to, you know, job retraining. And that's, that's a big chunk. And it's certainly much more than one organization can handle, especially given

that, you know, seeing CNIBs are also regional. You know, if you happen to be in a remote part of the province, you might not have access to a CNIB office. Right, Ryan? You went through that when you lost your vision, right?

R

Ryan Fleury 18:13

Yeah, absolutely. And I wasn't in, you know, out in the bush, I was living in Kamloops at the time. And you know, they had a little satellite office there. But all the orientation and mobility came out of Vancouver, or to Kelowna. And so it was once or twice a month, right? So, you know, in order to gain your independence, gain your mobility, learn your routes took twice as long as it would have if I would have lived in Vancouver. You know, learning Braille was done by correspondence. So, yeah, there's there's still a lack of services today. And of course, using Zoom and other virtual platforms have bridged that gap to a certain extent. But, you know, it's also shown that there's a lot of isolation out there, and people need to be in touch with people, you know, physically, emotionally making contact, making those connections on a regular basis.

M

Melanie Taddeo 19:07

And that's why it's so important for partnerships. You know, CNIB offers so many amazing programs, they changed my life when I lost my eyesight. But for us, as you know, we get a lot of people who are struggling that need services, but there's a huge waiting list. And it's because they are taxed that they don't have enough people go around because there's so many people who need services. So having partnerships with other organizations like balance for blind adults, or anything else that's out there that can help with any aspect of services in the meantime, at least. So there's like a tie over until you know, those services become available again. It's just we don't want people just swinging in the wind, just holding on for dear life to survive when there's opportunities for these other organizations to bridge that gap.

R

Ryan Fleury 19:55

And I was just gonna say a perfect example of this is the Rogers outage a week ago. Oh, you know, if everybody just got off their high horses and started working together, there'd be no gaps in the system anymore. But everybody wants to do their own thing their own way. These are my customers, you can't have access to them. And that has to change. Don't get me on my rant

R

Rob Mineault 20:20

Last week was your rant week. All right. Let's talk a little bit then about about when you when you first started Connect 4 Life and you started putting together the different programs? Was that sort of a strategy for you? Did you kind of look at the different holes that were say in the system and try to fill those in?

M

Melanie Taddeo 20:45

So yes and no. So I had had, I had started a learning center for adults with disabilities to teach life skills first. And that was a great experiment. This recommendation don't do with your own money, just saying. So it was great. It taught me a lot. It taught me about what was needed. So yes, the daily living skills was definitely essential life skills. But it was more than that - how to use computer job readiness, understanding relationships, toxic versus healthy. So having these conversations with people with various disabilities really opened my eyes, pardon the pun, but to really understand the depths and differences in different people's lives. So yes, I may know, a lot about vision loss. And I may understand, you know, paralysis and learning to walk again. But there was a lot of stuff I had to learn. And I talked to a lot of different groups of people from different disabilities, as well as the people that were there to help them in different organizations. And I asked them simple questions. In a perfect world, what would you like to learn? And what? Where would you get it? And if it didn't exist, why do you think it doesn't exist? And one thing I noticed is that a lot of people with various disabilities, loved technology, they loved radio, they loved all this great stuff with media. And I was like, Oh, I know nothing about this. So I also knew, though, I couldn't read brochures to get information. And I also knew that there had to be another platform to share information. So I started to think outside the box. And wouldn't it be really great to have a radio station where people can learn about resources that were out there, but also, these individuals that I'm meeting would have a platform to be able to share and practice their craft. So I started Voices 4 Ability Radio, which was the first 24/7 Internet radio station for and by people with disabilities. And this was great. But again, I knew nothing. So I had reached out to David Onley. And he was Lieutenant Governor at the time. And he said to me, have you heard of AMI? No, was that he's like, you're blind, you haven't heard of EMI? The answer was no. So he told me about Accessible Media Inc. and I reached out to them, and they were amazing. They taught me a lot about audio and things like that. And I did a lot of research and I contacted all the colleges and university with the radio broadcasting programs. And I asked them, How many people with disabilities are your problems? They said, none. Why? We don't have the equipment, we don't have the support. That's not acceptable. And I dug deeper, and I did research and into the broadcast industry, only 2% of employees in all of Canada, in this broadcasting field had disabilities. This is disgusting. So I created a program to help train individuals with various disabilities about accessible and public accessible voice and practicing about radio broadcasting. And it's a very introductory course, now it started off all about radio broadcasting, but it's evolved into podcasting. It's evolved into advocacy, it just has grown so far. And we've developed a beautiful relationship with AMI, CBC, and all the other broadcasters out there that helped come to guest lecturing, they, you know, really get the clients that take the course get a hands on, it's a 20 week course. Now it's virtual, which is great for people that are far from us. But we send out equipment to their house, they learn about voice, they learn about how to record how to edit all that fun stuff. And then their content can go on our radio station, or they can create their own podcast that they can monetize on whatever they want. They can put a demo reel together and then go on to post secondary if they want. But it's a free opportunity for them to learn if they like it or not, because there's nothing worse than going to school for something they hate. So it's really expanded. So asking those questions of where the gaps were, and then creating programs to fit those were the beginning stages. Now since then, again, with pandemic huge things have come up the isolation, the loneliness, the mental health. So then you create programs that are necessity and that was Connect 4 Wellness Program. But really listening to individuals with disabilities, whether our clients or not, just having conversations and finding out, we started an introduction to public speaking course as well, over the last couple of years, because people were afraid to advocate because they didn't like the way they sounded. Or they, I can't take radio broadcasting because I can't even talk I'm so scared. So, again, programs pop up, and we kind of say, okay, is this just a one off or is this something

that's straight across the bar? Lots of surveys, lots of conversations, lots of focus groups. And that's how we found out where we needed to do our work. Well, for some of us, it doesn't matter how many microphones you buy, how much equipment you have, or how much money you spent on the equipment, I still hate my voice. You have to learn to listen to your voice and just get accepted.

R

Ryan Fleury 25:46

Absolutely. How difficult is it for you to come up with these programs and services, because as your website says, you cater to people with disabilities, plural, not blindness, not low vision disabilities. So that spectrum is vast.

M

Melanie Taddeo 26:06

It is, but again, I have my background as special education teacher, so I know how to accommodate any lesson plan to meet the needs the learning needs of anybody. So for example, in our radio broadcasting program, we have individuals who are blind, we have individuals with autism, we have individuals who have physical disabilities, so the accommodation piece that they need, we start off at the very beginning, they let us know how we can best support them. Because my favorite question, how can I support you to be successful, and whatever they need, we provide it for them. And so the content is the same, perhaps it may be accommodated in certain ways, whether it's extensions of times, or assignments, or perhaps extra sessions with Reaper. Editing is not fun at any, whether you can see or not. But yeah, definitely having those extra sessions and really having that open dialogue. Okay, how you doing? What are you struggling with? Let's let's accommodate. So, yes, that piece I'm very blessed with because of having that background. But I will say this, there are some programs that we've had to say, you know, can we fulfill this need? Not that we're excluding anybody, but if we're not giving them quality programming isn't going to do. So if we're not able to do it, is there another resource we can provide for them? Because we don't do recreation, we don't do sports, we do not do music. So who's out there? Who does that stuff, let me connect you with them. So I never want to leave anyone hanging, that's my biggest thing.

R

Rob Mineault 27:30

I find it really interesting, this link between say, say public speaking skills, and even broadcasting skills, and how that can really link to advocacy and advocating for yourself, which, you know, again, to sort of tie things back to what we were talking about initially, is so important, and can be hard for a lot of people to do.

M

Melanie Taddeo 27:54

You know, I think what starts with is the fear, okay, so fear is always there. Am I going to sound like I know what I'm talking about? Am I going to come across as aggressive, you know, whatever it might be our fear in that little voice in our mind. As well as so many people growing up, depending on our backgrounds have been told, you know, you shouldn't speak out, you

should just keep your thoughts to yourself, behave, all those things, right. So we have all these predisposed beliefs in our mind that also play into the sphere. And then not knowing communication is key. When effectively communicating an idea, you have to make sure that the person listening, hears what you're saying. But if you go on and on and on and on, tell 10 stories to get your point across, that's not going to work. Especially when there's so many different styles of communication. I always use this example. My husband is a direct communicator, and I'm supportive, which means I like to share anecdotes and stories, because to me, it illustrates things and helps people understand. But he's like, get to the point. What do you say?

R

Ryan Fleury 28:56

Not just your husband, but that's me too.

M

Melanie Taddeo 29:00

So, until I understood that now I changed my communication style. When I talk to my husband, just give him the facts. And then if after he is interested in hearing my story, then I'll share it. So I think just sharing that piece is huge. And it's great. I'm an avid Toastmaster. I've been Toastmaster for nine years and I love the program. But for me, it just gave me that confidence, especially after losing my my eyesight because I was afraid that, uh, now I make jokes. You're laughing at rolling your eyes and I can't see anyway, so go for it. But it's just, you know, really, truly, whatever is going to make you confident and feel good about what you have to say because people need to hear it. And that's where accuracy comes back to it.. So who better to advocate for ourselves but ourselves, but who better to learn from ourselves than other people with disabilities? That's where I learned everything I know about living with disabilities from others that have lived experience. And if I didn't have that, I wouldn't be able to share with one of my clients either.

R

Rob Mineault 30:01

Yeah, you know, we we talk so much about the need for education. And I think that this is the the other great thing about these programs is that, you know, podcasting and radio, they're not only mediums that really fit well say within within the blindness community. But it's they're also great platforms for educating and for connecting people for somebody who's who is say, going through vision loss, being able to hear other people's stories, or being able to hear somebody on a radio or another podcast, like that can be an incredibly valuable experience for somebody.

M

Melanie Taddeo 30:42

Yes. And having people say, if they can do it, so can I. So when we have people like Kelly MacDonald, and Ramya from Kelly and Company onAMI who are living in with disabilities, they come and they inspire my classes. Like, wow, I can do this too, you know, it seems like almost achievable. Because we have role models. And that's the one great thing I love about a lot of our guest speakers, they are individuals with various disabilities in broadcasting. And it's great to hear their struggles and how they overcame them. And what is so great as the empower our

clients to keep going to keep trying, and they're open to having that conversation with them, even after they finished the program just to you know, get a little stuck, or start a little nudge in the right direction that whatever it might be. But I think you know, especially when you're going through that grieving time, especially and you feel so alone, it's only me that's going through this and you hear a podcast for somebody whose experience and how they overcame it. Wow, that's powerful.

R

Rob Mineault 31:47

The other component is to that I think is really valuable, too, is that for every person that goes out the door and goes out into the world and is doing their thing, whatever it is, and other people are seeing them and interacting with them, I think that that improves society in general too. Because, you know, people are seeing that disability isn't something scary or something to be avoided, or whatever their their reaction is, it's normalized to a point where we can sort of start removing the stigma of disability in the greater community and really start to drive forward the idea of inclusion and accessibility.

M

Melanie Taddeo 32:28

Absolutely. And set my goal is it for it to be the norm, not an afterthought, right? That that this is where we need to get. And that's right. The more that people are there, the more people are talking about it. The more aware people are more comfortable of you.

R

Ryan Fleury 32:42

I've given up hope on society. Oh, I read Twitter too much. No, like Rob said, you know, we talk about education all the time on this show. And, you know, I get so tired of, we need to educate, we need to educate, we need to educate. At some point. I think I've mentioned this before, I think we just need a disability uprising. We need to gather together and actually put aside our pettiness. And you know, my disability is better than your disability, and storm the legislature, have a parade we need to make our voices heard. We're the largest minority group in the world and we're not doing anything about it. We're all we're all segregated doing our own thing.

M

Melanie Taddeo 33:31

You know, it's interesting is that because that's the thing, a lot of organizations are specialized on certain types of disabilities. And I understand the need for that. But for me, I'm thinking, but everybody wants to learn the skills. So I think it's really good for our clients to see the different disabilities because they don't get it. So it's been a great experience for that. I see your point.

R

Rob Mineault 34:11

He's been on this for a while, It's okay. Just just just humor him, he's fine. But the community itself, it's such a huge community. And you're absolutely right, part of the challenge is of this is that there are so many gradients to disability. And there are so many individual needs. I mean,

it's just so far reaching that sure, it can be a challenge. And not only that there's no other community that has people can you anybody can enter into that community at any point in their life. And you know, honestly the chances are that they probably will at some point. So you know, it's so funny I, I kind of shake my head at at this stupidity of human nature sometimes because we're avoiding addressing a lot of these issues that most of us are probably going to be facing in our in our lifetime. But yet it's uncomfortable to think about or we're scared to think about it. So we just kind of shove it off and, you know, out of sight out of mind, we don't want to think about it.

M

Melanie Taddeo 35:20

And this is it, like, from every level of government right down to individuals, this is something we have to face because not only is the population aging, and that brings disability, but the reality is the healthy lifestyles people are living are going to lead to disability. So I, you know, whether it's conversations at legislator, legislative, or if it's going to be having conversations at home, about this, like my, my parents generation, people with disabilities were put away in institutions. So of course, when I acquired disability, they were having a conniption, what do we do? I'm like, nothing. You just gonna deal. YAnd having these conversations candidly, with our families, because you're right, it is going to hit everybody at some point in their lives, whether it's themselves or somebody they know.

R

Rob Mineault 36:16

So talk to us a little bit about some of the other programs that are available. What else do you guys sort of do?

M

Melanie Taddeo 36:22

Okay, so we do a lot of life skill workshops, obviously, we do you know, and that, that ranges, everything from as simple as you know, we do advocacy, obviously, there's huge advocacy piece. We do, how to do resume, so job readiness things, we also talk about meditation, we talk about things that will help healthy living, you know, what to, you know, what you should eat, the importance of sleep, things like that, but also on bullying, that's a huge piece. We find a lot of people are being bullied on social media. So safety of safe social media, you know, and even though we serve adults 18 and over, depending on the disability, and depending on their understanding of what bullying actually is. And then of course, for people that get it, just not reading into the rhetoric, and you know, miscommunication, misinformation, all that stuff. So, it really varies. And again, we base it on what we're looking for, we've had people say, I need sessions on how to use my smartphone, well, then we don't do that. So let me connect with somebody does. And that's when I send them off depending on their disability to certain facilities that will show them exactly what they can do with their smartphone. Like I could do that. I could show them but my smartphone and my love hate relationship with Siri, however, that's probably not going to be very effective for everybody. And again, it varies from season to season, as well, because with pandemic all of a sudden, what do I do at home? What can I do with my time? Well, have you discovered your creative side. You know, we did a Paint Night last year, we did a lot of different tactile things, so that depending on what's going on, in the sight of society, and community, whatever, whatever people are saying, you know, I really want

something like this, we'll find somebody to do a workshop. So that's the life skills. We've got, obviously, Voices 4 Ability, we're always looking for volunteers when they're hosting a show, doing some editing. And that's a great thing, you can do that from home, a lot of these things you can do from now that we're virtual with Zoom. And we have done some very basic exercise, you know, again, during the pandemic more than anything, because let's face it, we all were not active, we were in lockdown. And we again, don't want to reinvent the wheel. So if there's something out there that already exists, we're going to get people to come and talk about their programs, so that others can go and join their programs. Because I'm not about poaching clients. I'm not about reinventing the wheel. That doesn't make sense. Public speaking, one has been very, very popular. And I also do a workshop on how to craft your stories. So whether it's for speech, whether it's to read a book, or podcast, you know, whatever, to share your story. So that's something I'm passionate about, you know, because I'm an author. And I thought that was was cathartic experience. For me, I'm very big on journaling, all that stuff. So we've had a lot of workshops on that, but our advocacy referral process, so when people contact us looking for help, if we don't have it, we have a list of resources in Ontario. And I'll say it, I'll be honest, it's only in Ontario, right now. But we are looking to expand that stuff. And we share resources, we talk to people with different organizations, we make those connections, because sometimes you know, it's hard to find on Google, or it's overwhelming what they're going through, and they want to talk to people. So it may do a connection if we know organization that better support them. So and then we have the advocacy piece where people may be struggling at work, they're not getting the accommodations they need, but they're afraid to speak up. They don't want to lose their jobs. They'll come to us and we'll have that conversation with them. See how we can best support them. Sometimes it's going in and doing a service for that company to understand what accommodations actually are. Which is really sad that we have to do that. But you know, we will do whatever it takes to help our clients bridge that gap or feel comfortable about the situation. We've had to make a contrast about housing, these are the stuff we don't specialize in. But if we can help connect people with or refer people to an organization that does focus on that, that's what we do. And then of course, we do fundraising because that's always fun, isn't it? But in person, we used to do a lot of great comedy nights and dances and Galas, and all that fun stuff. So we've done a couple of virtual things like the paint night, we did virtually that was interesting. We've done inspirational speaking, that was really powerful beginning of the pandemic, when I was feeling this loss of hope. But also a lot of online fundraiser, we're gonna have a great silent auction for our radio station in the fall - all memorabilia from famous artists, meaning musicians. So that's gonna be really exciting. So a lot of things that go on for life that people can get involved in, whether it's volunteering, coming to events, if people have program ideas that they've always want to test out, and they want some volunteer experience, let's have a conversation. But really, the main one is our broadcasting program, that seems to be our main major focus, because that seems to be the most popular path this time.

R

Ryan Fleury 41:23

How do we get involved in the silent auction? I need another guitar.

M

Melanie Taddeo 41:26

Oh, there you go. So yeah, ,v4radio.com, the radio station is undergoing some changes. It's all 100% Canadian artists, emerging artists right now. But our talk shows are on a little hiatus, but we're going to get them back from running. And then we're going to have all the information

there. So v4radio.com will be all the information will be there or connect4life.ca. You'll have all the details there. And it's going to start I think we're starting to roll it in late fall. So please stay tuned.

R

Rob Mineault 42:03

So sorry, going back to talking a little bit about the organizations that you try to connect people with how big of a challenge is that for you in terms because it must kind of be hard because somebody must come to you with a specific problem. And then, you know, it might require quite a bit of research to try to find an organization that that's the right fit for them.

M

Melanie Taddeo 42:25

Yeah, and it's just so doesn't happen overnight, for sure. Because you want to make sure that it's the right fit. Because there's nothing worse than getting a referral to something that's totally not what you're looking for. So having several conversations with the individual looking for help, then contacting the different organizations that might fit the bill. And explaining without disclosing anything, do you do this sort of thing, I have somebody who may be interested. And then making that connection, that personal connection. So again, nobody's just hanging on waiting around, there's continuous conversation, so they feel at least that they've been connected, and then follow up. Because even though you've referred somebody, that doesn't mean that's it's done, because what if they get referred in the person forgets them? And then it looks bad on you. Even though it's not you, you've done your part, but I always try to stay in touch and just touch base. You know, are you okay, do you require anything else, that sort of thing. But really building the relationship with the other organizations is key. So we obviously have a great relationship with CNIB, with balance for blind adults. So March of Dimes, different hospitals in the area, because again, many disabilities are acquired later, and Community Living Development Services Ontario, many different organizations, and just really going out to all these different resource fairs, finding what are their organizations are out there and having those conversations because again, I don't want to reinvent the wheel, if there's an employment specialist program for individual disabilities on want to know about it. And because there's a lot of people looking for work. And it's sometimes their service provider isn't getting them what they need, so maybe they need to explore. So having that list of resources, and then counseling is the biggest gap. So there's a lot of programs that are offering free counseling, but you have to have criteria. And if you don't fit that criteria, it's not free anywhere else. And it just sliding scale. So having those conversations to see if it's the right fit, does take time, for sure.

R

Rob Mineault 44:17

I want I want to I want to talk a little bit about that actually, because because I really do feel personally that that mental health programs across the board, not not just within the disability community, but mental health services is still something that in Canada, we really need more of. Whether that be, you know, regular counseling sessions for people that are affordable, or whatever, just places to go to really have mental health check ins, but I would imagine within the disability community that's even more so because again, to go back to talking about say

something like vision loss where somebody does have a very specific pathway that they're on in terms of, of mental health. Is that something that we really need to beef up within that community as well?

M

Melanie Taddeo 45:14

Yes, most definitely. Because again, not only is it the mental health piece, but it's the disability related piece that goes along with that. So imagine, like I speak for myself, after acquiring my disability, I also developed huge anxiety, I couldn't see where I was going anymore. Oh, my gosh, what if, what if, what if. So, also, now I'm faced with another dilemma, and again, not knowing anything about it, you know, you get sent out to your doctor, and they talk to me, oh, you should join this support group, and they're all talking about things you don't relate to, because nobody else in the group has vision loss. So it's like, okay, they don't get it. They're worried about whatever they're, they're dealing with. So you really want to find in the programs that we're referring people to is there that counseling piece for that disability. And it may not be. So for example, in our Connect 4 Wellness program, we just ran with individuals with intellectual disabilities, somebody with vision loss, somebody that had physical disability, so they all have a disability, but it's a different disability. So they're examples. Yeah, they're suffering from anxiety, yes, they're suffering from whatever. But they have three different ways. So not only are we learning from one another, but are our counselors able to address it, because they too, have lived experience. So this is the beautiful thing. And I firmly believe, especially as a special education teacher who better to teach or share or listen than somebody that's been through it themselves. Because that way you connect, you can have real tangible things. So yes, we need to beef this up in all areas. And this is where the mental health funding needs to go. Because unfortunately, we hear too too many times about people taking their own lives. And when you have disability on top of mental health, it can be very overwhelming and too taxing for many people. So we want to address this for sure.

R

Ryan Fleury 47:15

In your eight, nine, ten years of being part of running, organizing, Connect 4 Life. Is there one major hurdle or barrier that is common amongst all to persons with disabilities that you were speaking to engaging with?

M

Melanie Taddeo 47:36

Okay, so, absolutely. So one of the organizations, all disability organizations, it's that barrier funding, okay, first and foremost, for individuals with disabilities, it's going to be employment. Unemployment, I should say. It's just, it's rampant. It's terrible. Like I do so many presentations to employers. I don't know how many times said, you know, accommodations do not have to be expensive. There's funding out there to help you, you know, people with abilities, that they have abilities don't look at the disability, they just, it's so I feel like I hit my head against the wall.

R

Ryan Fleury 48:12

Oh, absolutely. You know, housing an issue, you know, people are on social assistance, and

Oh, absolutely. You know, housing an issue, you know, people are on social assistance, and they can't afford to put food on the table. The whole social system has to change.

M Melanie Taddeo 48:25

Yeah, it does. And they need to ask people living with the experience, rather than just what they think looks good.

R Ryan Fleury 48:32

Well, there's that whole nothing about us without us.

R Rob Mineault 48:38

Yep, it's true. You know, when and especially in a time right now, where where, you know, a lot of businesses are saying, wow, it's impossible to find people. It's like, well --

M Melanie Taddeo 48:50

So many people looking right now.

R Rob Mineault 48:53

Yeah, that's right. There's this untapped resource, and you just have to be willing to sort of take a chance and become, you know, a bit educated about accessibility and an adapted workplace, which isn't hard. It's not rocket science at all.

R Ryan Fleury 49:08

That's that's another issue too, is you know, I was unemployed for a short period of time. And I guess foolish me, I went to an employment agency, just mainstream public employment agency, saying, here are my skills. Here's kind of what I'm good at. Here's what I'm kind of looking for. You know, what about this, this, this? Okay, well, you know, I need to learn the route to get there because I use a white cane. Oh, well, how are we going to do that? You know, it was just a whole coordination of everything right? And they just didn't understand that I couldn't just show up, get the job or do the interview. There was a process that had to be involved with.

M Melanie Taddeo 49:47

And also you get the service providers for employment for people with disabilities, but you'd like him to work at Tim Hornton's or stocking shelves. Yeah, Good again. There's always going to be some aspect that needs to change. But we'll get there.

R Ryan Fleury 50:05
Where do you get your optimism from?

M Melanie Taddeo 50:10
There's nothing wrong with stocking shelves and nothing wrong with Tim Hortons. Again, but when you have bachelor's and all this experience the stuff just pigeonhole people because you have a disability that frustrates me.

R Rob Mineault 50:22
Sure. I'm just going to be phoning the legislature and warning them that Ryan might be showing up.

R Ryan Fleury 50:27
On my way with my group.

R Rob Mineault 50:32
Ready to storm the place. Well, listen, Melanie, we want to thank you so much for taking some time out and talking with us about Connect 4 Life. If people are interested in the many programs that you offer, where can people find you guys?

M Melanie Taddeo 50:50
Connect4life.ca is our website. Please be mindful, it is under renovations. Once again, it's there, but it's not beautiful. We're working on the accessibility we're working on the content, we're just shifting gears because again, as programs come up, so you know it is current, but it may not be beautiful, please. And we are working towards that. But that's the best way you can contact us there. Please email me Melanie@connect4life.ca. And again, I'm happy to have a conversation, set up a zoom, call whatever you need.

R Rob Mineault 51:21
Again, Melanie, thanks so much. Best of luck. And by all means, reach out and contact us if you ever want to come on again. And talk some more programs.

M Melanie Taddeo 51:32
Absolutely, thank you so very much for the opportunity.

Absolutely, thank you so very much for the opportunity.

R Ryan Fleury 51:35

Lots of information from another organization that most people probably don't know exists.

R Rob Mineault 51:42

She's not wrong. We need three of these in every province. Like forget one we need, like three of them.

R Ryan Fleury 51:50

You know, and just listening to that whole conversation. You know, she was talking about, you know, the needs of people, you know, there's this gap here, this gap here, housing and so on. You know, I remember our show we did with Incluso, out of Calgary, right, accessible living, and you just don't hear about these places being built, you know, governments are setting so many aside and new developments and stuff, but it's just not enough. So yeah, you know, you're right, we need this advocacy movement happening. We need these organizations to just all we need to come together and let our voices be heard. These are our needs stop ignoring us. We're taxpayers, we're employees, we're business owners, you know, like, start paying attention to us.

R Rob Mineault 52:33

They'll pay attention when we're setting fire to the parliament building.

R Ryan Fleury 52:45

True, right, like, you know, wait, like, how many organizations organizations have we spoken to that? We hear the same story that Melanie has shared. Right, yeah. You know, she's probably worked off her feet. And she's just in Ontario.

R Rob Mineault 52:58

That's right. I mean, you think about the need across the entire country? It does feel overwhelming. And, you know, just one or two organised large organizations, they're not going to have the resources to do everything in the country is too vast. It's silly to think that they can, like CNIB can't do it all. They shouldn't be doing at all. I mean, they're great for what they do, but, you know, there's going to be other smaller organizations that we need to sort of take up the slack.

R Rvan Fleurv 53:30

Ryan Fleury 53:00

Yeah, what if you're living way up north in the Yukon, Whitehorse, you know, there's going to be services there. But, again, not the same as you would have in a major center such as Vancouver, Toronto. You know, we need these grassroots organizations everywhere.

R

Rob Mineault 53:50

But you know, what's what's really interesting, and that I hadn't really thought about before we had Melanie on was this link, again, you know, what, I brought this up in the interview, but this link between public speaking and broadcasting and advocacy. Because we need the other thing that we need is we need more advocates out there, we need more people making noise, like you said, and when people feel confident in speaking and they feel passionate about being advocates, the more of them out there, the better.

R

Ryan Fleury 54:22

Yeah, and I think, again, you know, I'm gonna come back to I think we need this hive mentality to do the advocacy, right? You know, we've got the onesies, twosies that are, you know, the whatever you want to call them, the trendsetters on Twitter, or the YouTube stars or, you know, we've got so and so giving a speech to Parliament about accessible whatever cities, smart cities, accessible transit, you know, that's 1,2,3 people talking about one topic. I just, I still think we need this hive mentality. We need to come together more so than we do.

R

Rob Mineault 54:59

Yeah, no, You're not wrong, you're not wrong.

R

Ryan Fleury 55:02

You know what it's gonna take. But, you know, we got this group on the left talking with, you know, what's important to them. We got the group on the right. You know, we've got people living with autism, which, you know, we know is a spectrum. Like there's an impairment spectrum. We got, you know, people in wheelchairs, they have their needs. Like, like I said before, it's we're the largest minority group in the world, and yet the world slowly ignoring us.

R

Rob Mineault 55:28

Yeah, exactly. Until the moment that they enter that community. And then it's oh, wait a minute.

R

Ryan Fleury 55:33

Yeah. Just I don't get it. I don't know. I don't know. What are we gonna do? I don't know. Send your comments and suggestions.

R Rob Mineault 55:43
See, maybe maybe it's a live show. Maybe that will solve all the problems?

R Ryan Fleury 55:48
Well, there's, there's a whole there's the topic starter for the live show.

R Rob Mineault 55:52
Yeah. I think we just put a GoPro on your head with a helmet and send you up towards the legislature and just watching you rapping on the doors. Throwing rocks at the building and getting arrested.

R Ryan Fleury 56:07
I pay my taxes just like you do. Right?

R Rob Mineault 56:12
Well, no, we're not gonna solve any problems today, I'm afraid.

R Ryan Fleury 56:16
No, but we're sharing information that will be hopefully informative and important to somebody who may reach out to Melanie and have their lives changed.

R Rob Mineault 56:25
That's right. Well, anything else to say about that? Or shall we wrap it up?

R Ryan Fleury 56:32
Yeah, I think we can wrap it up a little on the early side. But that's alright. More time for dinner.

R Rob Mineault 56:37
I think we're I think we're on time. But whenever. Well, okay, now we got to completely recalibrate this because I don't think we've done we haven't done like, just me and you show for ages. Oh, easy peasy. Okay. Well, I mean, let's try this out. Hey, Ryan.

R Ryan Fleury 56:54
Yeah. Rob.

R Rob Mineault 56:55
Hey, where can people find us?

R Ryan Fleury 56:57
They can find us at atbanter.com

R Rob Mineault 57:00
they can also drop us an email if they so desire at cowbell@atbanter.com.

R Ryan Fleury 57:09
And they can find this on Facebook, and Twitter. And guess what else? They can listen to us on Spotify. On Apple podcasts, Google Podcasts. Anywhere they listen to podcasts, they can listen at atbanter.com

R Rob Mineault 57:35
And you know what they should do? Really, if they are doing that, they should really leave us a like or subscribe or follow or just press whatever button is in front of you. They're on your app or your internet browser. Just click all the buttons. And because we would help us out a lot.

R Ryan Fleury 57:55
Yeah, give us at least a rating on Apple podcasts if that's where you listen and you know, that just goes to show that you appreciate what we're doing.

R Rob Mineault 58:04
Or send a check to Ryan for \$10.

R Ryan Fleury 58:07
Oh, no, I don't need their money. I just need their ears.

R Rob Mineault 58:12
Oh my god. You're collecting ears over there?

R Ryan Fleury 58:22
Better to hear you with?

R Rob Mineault 58:27
All right. Wow.

R Ryan Fleury 58:28
Pull out my ear satchel

R Rob Mineault 58:37
All right, this is going off the rails. Alright, hey, that is gonna about do it for us for this week. Thanks, everybody for listening in. And big thanks to Melanie for joining us. And we will see everybody next week. Bye.