

Amy Amantea Pt. 3 | Discover Stories Episode 76

Sponsor Announcement 00:00

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Tanya Griffiths 00:50

I honestly didn't even hear about like what was an active listener in, in reference to just theatre or productions and having an active listener available, just in case something was, hit a bit too deep. And it was necessary to take time for oneself. And, you know, just being able to tell yourself, "Oh, if there's something within the next two hours that does hit home, or I need time, or I need to process this, then there's there's somebody available for me, which I think is incredible, honestly, and I yeah, just just incredible.

Amy Amantea 01:37

It's just another access piece. Right? It's another level of access that we can that we can use to support anybody who's in our theatre space. And, again, I truly believe that access is about options. There's no one size fits all solution. So you know, even if we're if we're working with, you know, a deaf and hard of hearing community, you know, ASL and captions and enhanced hearing devices, right, enhanced audio, like you have to have all of those things - can't just have one of those things. So this is how we have to think about it is you can't just say, you know, I've got Braille so it's, you know, accessible for all blind people. Well, 2% of the blind community reads Braille. And that doesn't mean that Braille is not important. It's absolutely important, absolutely essential. It is the first form of literacy for folks who are born blind or who lose vision very, very young. Right? They have to have a form of literacy, but to you know, go to a theatre and say, well, I've made a program in Braille, you're blind, you should be able to access this is not true. So Braille, large print, digital copies in both PDF and word available on your website. Did somebody read an

audio file? Oh, that would be lovely. If I could just have somebody read it to me in an audio file, right. That's the six options right there.

Tanya Griffiths 03:01

Yeah. Yeah. And I think something that that stuck with me about something you said earlier, is just taking those purposeful, meaningful steps forward, no matter how small they are. And I think that, well I imagine it to be difficult, or maybe even embarrassing for some folks, or some organizations or some companies to just be like, "Oh, this is where we are in accessibility, or this is where we are in inclusion." And coming to terms with that, I feel like, it offers this huge sense of clarity, but also is just like, "Oh, wow, we actually haven't done a great job." But even though there are those feelings that come up, and I think, you know, they do come up because they somewhat care. It's also about the future and it's also about like, taking those steps towards the future. So I think just hearing about all these creative access pieces, just existing, I think also makes me feel like wow, we are doing this doing the steps we are going forward, we are progressing, even though they might be in smaller communities, or in very specific productions, they're still happening - and that you exist. I think, I think I'm just happy Amy Amantea exists, honestly.

Amy Amantea 04:49

That's really kind of you to say. I mean, I hope that it sounds, that it feels obvious and it sounds obvious that I'm passionate about this, that I'm authentic about this. And I love this work. It's one of the reasons why I say to folks that you know, I mean, I get as many questions as anybody else does about, you know, the cure for blindness and what I take it and all of those things. And if I hadn't experienced blindness and disability to the level that I have, I - like all of this stuff has really enriched my life. And I feel like I have a lot of purpose. And that really gets me up in the morning, and moves me through my day doesn't matter how much pain I'm in, doesn't matter how sick I feel. I feel like I'm accountable to my community. And that the work is so good and valuable and enriching. And I mean, even when you're talking about, you know, organizations feeling like, embarrassed or maybe even guilty, like, we haven't done anything, you know, I'm working on helping some organizations right now write their accessibility plans, because they are part of legislation for some organizations and corporations and companies, municipalities to write an Accessibility Plan, and some of these folks have no accessibility. I've never thought about it, I've never done it, I've never right, and you're right, they're starting from nothing. And they feel that sort of heaviness when you look at what you're supposed to put in this plan. And it's like, what do you have currently? And they're like, nothing. And it's like, well, what have you done? Nothing. What who have you asked about accessibility? No one, you know, like,

what, you know, how have you connected with the community? We haven't. And you really just have to remind folks that this isn't an exercise for me, this is for me, like, I'm not speaking on behalf of the whole community, because it's certainly frustrating to have to, like, educate everybody, you do it one person at a time. It's certainly frustrating to always be the teaching moment. I've chosen that, not everybody wants to do that. But my philosophy is, let's not apologize for what we haven't been able to do for the people before us that didn't do anything. There's not much we can do about going back and changing the past. But we can focus on right now. And purposeful, meaningful steps forward. You know, when we've done a harm in the past, that's a different thing. And I suppose doing nothing could be harmful. Absolutely. But unless that we can, like go back and right that wrong, and there's a way to do that, then we really just have to, like pick that point on that continuum and say, This is where we have this is realistically, where we're starting from, which is nothing and in some instances, starting from nothing. It's kind of a good place to start. Because you have a blank slate, so to speak. And there are lots of ways to go. And some people find that overwhelming. And it can be but this is about a journey. And if you don't go through the journey, if you rush through it, you also won't do any internal learning, and how does that help you as an organization, how does that help anybody that comes into your organization who's looking at the legacy of things that you've done, right? Well, what have we done in the past nothing, or we've done these things, and they may have been slow moving. And if somebody lives with a disability, I will always say it never moves fast enough. It never will move fast enough for me. But I also appreciate that for able bodied folks who are trying to do this work, if it moves too quickly, they don't learn. If they get too overwhelmed, they get defeated and they stop. If they don't find any joy in the work, they don't want to continue, and we're just a bunch of burden, you know, burdensome people. And so I want to make the work, feel gratifying, feel purposeful. And so sometimes the smaller steps, the wins, we celebrate every win, makes you feel good. And you're like, Oh, yes, we got this part. We know how to do this really well. Let's build. And that's, I mean, that's great when you're starting from a blank slate, and like the first policy that you introduce introduced into your organization is we're going to send out every internal document in both PDF and Word, because we know that that's the accessible thing to do. And everybody does that. And everybody's been doing that. And that's the thing and you know, it happens every time and you're like, great, we know how to do this. Let's build what's the next level and that may seem very simple, but it's a win. It's a win, especially for me who needs a document in Word. And all the staff documents are in PDF. Right? Like now imagine that I'm in. And this happens to me in my work all the time when the documents go out. And I have to, I have to send a "Thank you for sending these documents. As a reminder, can you please send me an accessible version in Word," so then I'm behind, you know, on getting my work done, because then that person has to get that email, oh,

then they send an apology email and then they have to convert it back to Word all and it goes on and on and on, which just makes me feel like somebody who is a burden, because I've had to ask again, and again and again, and then I'm behind in my own work. So it takes me longer to do anything than anybody else. Because it takes me longer to get the accessible materials, right? When we could just do it from the beginning and get those two things out of the way done. That's a win win. We can get both, you know, it's a simple easy win. And then we build. Yeah, but we can't jump to like, you know, putting in elevators in buildings when we can't send out a document in two formats. Right. And so this is, this is the thing where we try to try to do stuff. And so sometimes I find that people want to, to jump to like the most impactful access, and don't know how to do the most basic access. And sometimes it's the most basic, like training staff is sometimes the most basic thing that you can do in terms of accessibility, that human to human connection, but can be the most impactful thing that you can do as an organization. Because that's that's the that's the human human experience.

Tanya Griffiths 11:37

Absolutely.

Amy Amantea 11:40

And then you build, you build, I'm all about building the layers. But if you just I don't know, kind of just like a cake, you can't build the top layer. First, you have to build it from the bottom up with really good scaffolding, really good foundation. And then the work feels really good and really satisfying. And you see the impact on on folks that you work with and within your organization. And it feels doable, and it feels enjoyable, it doesn't feel overwhelming. And when it starts to feel overwhelming people who do it feel defeated and exhausted, and then it becomes a project off the side of your desk. And then we stopped doing it. So I'd rather take small, purposeful, meaningful steps than big large steps, knowing that the build is so important.

Tanya Griffiths 12:26

Yeah. And those steps are taken with so much care and intentionality. And just the willingness instead of as he put it, like, do one of those like big grand gestures, but then it seems just bit more performative or a bit more like, oh, yeah, we care, but then how about, you know, the connectivity between your staff, you know, how about that connection piece you said. So, no, I am honestly just learning so much from you from from this talk. And as we as we come to a gentle close to our conversation today, I just wanted to ask, what is the

most surprising thing you've learned about yourself through your journey with vision loss, advocacy, and the arts?

Amy Amantea 13:22

The most surprising thing I've learned about myself. I can do hard things. I can do hard things. Both emotionally, physically. I can hold space for others. That's something that you learn along the way in the journey. It's not all about me. When you're young, it's all about you. As you grow as you meet people in your community, it's really easy to see that it's not all about you. I benefit from the work I do, obviously, but it's never about me. And how important community is. I would not be a successful human being - just a human being. And by successful I mean, happy in my life. Happy with the friendships that I've made, happy with the work that I do, feeling fulfilled in a lot of ways. Again, learning about myself and where my boundaries are learning self care, something I'm constantly working at, because I'm not good at that. Maybe that's also something that I've learned is that I'm not good at self care. I'm good at taking care of others, but not myself. But the importance of community is probably one of the most valuable things that I've learned and probably one of the things that I have taken for granted when I didn't have a disability - was probably something that I didn't really recognize the value in, it could have been just because I was younger too. But community has your back. In the best ways, community is not perfect. We have within the disability, our own disability hierarchy, our own internalized ableism. We have all of those things, there's no doubt about it. We're not all friends with each other. We have internal conflicts, all sorts of things. We're not even all you know, just because you have a disability doesn't mean you align with disability justice doesn't mean you care about fighting for accessibility doesn't mean you care about advocacy or educate. You don't have to it we don't, we don't assume that just because you have a disability that you are, you know, writing legislation and working on building access, right? Like, some people are like, Oh, listen, I just want live my life, you know, and that's fine, totally fine. But that's the thing that you learn about being in community. And I have learned so much from my community, especially from other blind folks, and without meeting other blind folks, because my first entry into the blind world essentially was through sighted people who were telling me what I needed to do as a blind person. And while I'm sure they had the best of intentions, it wasn't until I met other blind people, which I was so hesitant to do, because me I'm not blind. No, no, no, no, no, that's no, I'll never identify as that. But once I started to meet other blind people, then I was like, "Well, wait a second, they're doing this thing. I can do this thing, too." And it might be terribly inconvenient at times. But I still have a life to live. And they're living their lives. So like, how are they doing this? And what can I learn from them? What can they teach me? What do they want to teach me? What can I get involved

in? And so I've learned a lot of like life hacks, like basic things like how to identify shampoo and conditioner bottles for me, like really basic stuff that you're like, Wow, that's a game changer. I had no idea that if I just put an elastic band around two bottles that are I feel identical, that I can be like, oh, yeah, this one's shampoo. Like, so simple. It doesn't have to be like sophisticated and like super technical, it can be really simple. But I would have never thought about that on my own, especially being new to blindness. So the sooner you get involved with community, like don't resist it, especially if you're somebody who's acquired disability, don't sit at home, and waste precious time, saying "poor me." Take those moments, you're allowed to have them, you need to have them, it's part of the process. But the sooner you find community, the sooner those "poor me" moments turn into, like, the disability rant session where we get to like, complain to each other about all the crappy pooppy things that happen in a day that's like ableist. And then we could laugh about them. Which actually feels really cathartic, and really good when you get to talk about, you know, somebody who's done something really ridiculous, you know, like, can you believe it? Like somebody caught me in a prayer circle the other day, sorry, it has nothing to do about prayer, but like, you know, I've sinned so badly, and that's why I'm blind. Really, that's it, okay. Or whatever it is, right? Like, I have a friend who's a little person that uses a power chair. And she talks a lot about riding the skytrain, and she's like, I always have people's butts in my face. And you're like, oh, yeah, I never thought about it that way, of course, your butt height with everybody. And like, you have a good laugh over that. It sucks. But it's a laugh, right? So when you're in community with people that have shared experiences, you have a good laugh, doesn't matter how crappy your day is, find that and find the empowerment in that. Because this shared experience and the sucky stuff, and the shared experience and the wonderful stuff builds you into a really strong, independent human being, because you have to allow yourself to feel this sucky stuff. To also allow yourself to feel the fun, joyful stuff.

Tanya Griffiths 19:21

Absolutely. And humor is a great tool to get there and to share that experience with others. Thank you so much, Amy, this this conversation was very enriching for me. And I'm just so honored to be in this conversation with you so. So thank you for your time for sharing your wisdom, your knowledge. I'm sure that our that the folks engaging with this conversation today also feel the same way. So thank you. Thank you so much.

Amy Amantea 20:01

I'm so honored to have been asked by you to participate in this. So thank you for reaching out.

Tanya Griffiths 20:08

Is there anything that you would like the folks who are listening in or tuning in to know about any of the work, how they can reach out to you.

Amy Amantea 20:21

I mean, folks, and find me in lots of ways, I would love folks to check out Through My Lens, the website is throughmylens.ca if they want to check out that project, and you know, I just I hate to be the only one still using Facebook these days. But it is one of the most accessible social media platforms for me as a blind person to use. So you can find me at Amy Amantea on Facebook. And yeah, I encourage people to engage with me in any way that they would like to. I also host a radio show called Access Radio, which is all about the disability experience. It's again, for the community, with the community about the community. And it's a little bit like what you're doing here. And it's a weekly show. So I'm always looking for folks to share whatever they want to share on that platform. So find me, poke me to, talk about whatever you want to talk about. There's no conversation that's off limits. And if you identify with anything that's relating to the disability experience, you can talk about whatever you want. So yeah, come and hang on access radio, maybe we should play this episode on access radio and send listeners to your platform to.

Tanya Griffiths 21:47

We'll figure it out. But it was really such an honor. So thank you, Amy. And I'm sure we'll find another way to connect with each other soon.

Amy Amantea 21:56

I hope that we do!

Tanya Griffiths 21:58

Amazing.