

Episode 36 | Emily Chambers

Sarah Smith 0:12

Hello and welcome to Discover Stories on Re-Imagine Radio. My name is Sarah Smith, and I'm a student intern at the Vancouver Adapted Music Society, as well as your host of Discover Stories today. Joining me is Emily Chambers, musician and program coordinator at Connectra Society. But just before jumping into our conversation today, it's important to take a moment to acknowledge the land on which we are fortunate to host this podcast. This is the unceded and ancestral territory of the Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh Nations, and has been stewarded by them since time immemorial. Vancouver is located on territory that was never seized or given up to the crown by these Peoples. The term unseated acknowledges the dispossession of the land and the inherent rights that Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh hold to the territory. The term serves as a reminder that these Peoples have never left their territories and will always retain their jurisdiction and relationships with the land. And now, Emily, welcome to Discover Stories.

Emily Chambers 1:18

Hello. How are you? Thanks for having me.

Sarah Smith 1:21

I'm doing well. Thank you so much for taking the time to have a conversation with us today.

Emily Chambers 1:26

Yeah.

Sarah Smith 1:27

Just to start things off, I thought maybe you could give an introduction of yourself and your background and a bit about your role at Connectra.

Emily Chambers 1:36

For sure. So I have been with the Disability Foundation since September 2020. I am a musician, and was doing full time music, I was actually living in Nashville, before the pandemic. So that changed things for me, as it did for so many and yeah, I started actually working for Tetra on a project called netClé, and that was a contract position. I wasn't really sure what I was going to do next, and I just really loved the environment and the people that I was working with and the kind of work we were doing. And a position came up

to take over the ConnecTra program coordinator role six months later, I think it was and, yeah, I jumped on it. So I've been in this position for about a year and a half, which is crazy, steady job for that long in a long time. [Laughs]

Sarah Smith 2:32

Very cool.

Emily Chambers 2:33

Yeah, and basically what I do as program coordinator for ConnecTra is help to facilitate conversations, forums, bring together community in events, both online and in person, and just really try and create opportunities for people within the disability community.

Sarah Smith 2:51

Very cool, very cool. Yeah, that does sound like a big shift from from music into this world, but it sounds like you've been able to do roles in a couple of different places and get a sense for things. So that's neat.

Emily Chambers 3:02

Yeah.

Sarah Smith 3:02

Could you just for our listeners, tell us what ConnecTra means or stands for? That name is neat.

Emily Chambers 3:12

ConnecTra, I believe, is just for meeting, like, connect together. We're connecting basically agency for people in our community and with resources and other people in the community.

Sarah Smith 3:26

Okay, cool.

Emily Chambers 3:26

So we have an online learning program called ConnecTogether, and it's just basically about, yeah, connecting people with each other in the community, and then also, like resources and other organizations that are catered to their needs.

Sarah Smith 3:39

Very cool, very cool. So it sounds like you've got a pretty broad web of services that are offered, but the sort of main theme there holding everything together is that connection piece.

Emily Chambers 3:50

Yeah, for sure.

Sarah Smith 3:51

Very cool. And we mentioned, you know, that your background is in music. I learned that you studied music, and like you said, you were full time before coming into this role, given that that's one of your big passions, have you been able to integrate that at all into your work at ConnecTra, or in this, this new world with the Disability Foundation?

Emily Chambers 4:13

Yeah, I guess most recently, I was a part of the VAMS Strong Sessions concert, so I emceed that, and I sung a couple tunes with one of the acts there, and that was sort of my first face to face experience with VAMS, Vancouver Adapted Music Society, which was so cool, and the things that they're doing is very obviously touches near and dear to my heart. So I'm hoping to be more involved with some things that they're doing, and then just in the day to day and ConnecTogether. I really get to be creative in this job with finding organizations and planning programming and a lot of event planning that goes into things. So a lot of things that come with becoming like an independent artist are logistics and tour planning and so I think a lot of my organizational skills have come to use in this role. Yeah, and music is still very much a part of my life. And we're thinking about maybe hosting a songwriting series on ConnecTogether in the new year, and, yeah, just maybe getting a little bit more involved in the VAMS mini school program. So there's a lot of crossover.

Sarah Smith 5:22

Very cool. Yeah, it's nice that you're able to integrate that as well. That's awesome. Speaking of the programs that ConnecTra offers, could you tell us a little bit more about them?

Emily Chambers 5:32

Yes. So we have regular programming from Monday to Friday on ConnecTogether, so everything is hosted on Zoom and our programs usually run from 12 to 1pm so on Mondays, we do something called service Mondays, where we highlight an organization or nonprofit that's usually local to BC, but we have done some Canada wide ones as well. So they'll sort of present on the type of resources and the sort of services that they can offer

our community. And then on Tuesdays, right now, we are doing ConnectTogether reruns, so you can see all of our videos on our YouTube channels, and almost all of our programming is live broadcasted to Facebook and YouTube. So if you ever miss anything or 12 to 1 pm isn't a good time for you, you can catch them later and go back and re-watch. Wednesdays, we have adaptive chair yoga, on Thursdays, we have adaptive fitness. And Fridays, we have rotating adaptive dance classes. And coming up in November, really excited about Tuesdays, we're going to start having coaching sessions with Chi-Ka, who is a life coach in the disability community that's going to be covering a myriad of topics for eight weeks, and you can drop in, or you can attend them all. So yeah, there's always a rotating series of things coming through, and you can check it all out at connectra.org/events.

Sarah Smith 6:59

Lovely. Thank you. I love that there's such a broad range of topics and activities in there, just in those those 12 to one sessions, that's awesome. And I noticed too the the decision to host them on Zoom, is that something that was done for accessibility reasons or to be able to have a broader reach, or how did that decision come to be?

Emily Chambers 7:20

I do think the Zoom, I mean, because I started in 2020 I know we were doing a lot more in person things before then. So I think Zoom is a factor of kind of a bunch of different things, not being able to get together in person, of course. And then really like the feedback that I've heard again and again over the pandemic from our community is how much more accessible Zoom events have been, you know, to some people that deal with chronic pain and don't know how they're going to be day to day and not necessarily be able to make it out to something or get out of the house, have felt much more involved and included in this community. So I think that it's working really well. I know a lot of people miss the in person, so we are trying to bring some of that back and do a couple, like every other month or so. But yeah, I think overall, it's been, like, kind of a blessing in bringing more people together. And yes, for sure, like having a wider reach beyond Vancouver and the Lower Mainland for us.

Sarah Smith 8:19

Yeah, those are all really good reasons, and it sounds like you're also hearing from what your community is giving is feedback for what they need as well.

Emily Chambers 8:27

Yeah, absolutely.

Sarah Smith 8:29

Yeah, that's fantastic. So a minute ago, you mentioned that working with ConnectTra is near and dear to your heart. I was wondering if you could maybe elaborate on that, or talk a bit about what drew you to work at ConnectTra.

Emily Chambers 8:41

Yeah, I think anytime you can sort of be involved in a community that's outside of your regular scope of sort of people that come into my life and day to day basis, or have been. I grew up in Vancouver and just being a part of the disability community and not having a disability myself, it's really been extremely eye opening just to our sort of systems in society, our sort of deep-seated, you know, ableism. It's opened my eyes to a lot of language that is just sort of innately in and around us. That's not okay, and it's just opened my realm to like so many beautiful people. So I think that was something that definitely drew me in. I think cultivating community anywhere is super important and special and really like the only thing that matters at the end of the day is that you have people around you, and then, yeah, just getting to be creative with the programming, super fun. We did a huge Abilities Expo last year. You know, we had over 30 different vendors. There was, like over 200 people in attendance. We had a bunch of different speakers. And just being able to be like, "Okay, we could go in this direction. We could. In that direction." We could go in all directions and kind of, you know, talk and get feedback from the people that benefit from the programs, and create something together. That's always, I've always like, put on shows and put myself on bills with artists that I've admired, and, you know, created experiences that way. And so it's really cool to plant a seed and then see it come to fruition. So ConnectTra's give me lots of opportunities to do that.

Sarah Smith 10:29

Yeah, nice. Yeah, that's very cool. And I loved what you said a minute ago about cultivating community. Yeah, I think that's that's really important, and it seems like ConnectTra's doing a great job of that along those lines, what role do you think ConnectTra plays within the community?

Emily Chambers 10:45

I think it is hopefully a very safe and inclusive environment for people to come we're starting to get a resource database going on on the website. So I want it to feel like, you know, "I have a disability. I just moved to the Lower Mainland, where should I go to look for resources? Let's go to connectra.org." Or, you know, "I have a child with a disability that's looking to be more involved in community. Where can I find about events that are going

on?" So I would love it to become just sort of a hub for, you know, the disability community. And even beyond the Lower Mainland, I know in 2021 we did a road show. It was a virtual road show. And we went, quote, unquote, we went to Okanagan and Vancouver Island, and we got to connect with all of these organizations that also serve this community in their areas. There's just, there's so much going on and there, there are a lot of resources. There are some gaps, which I also think is important for us to have these conversations so we find out where the gaps are. But there just isn't a ton of promotion around it, I feel. And I think a lot of these services and organizations are in the nonprofit sector, and so there isn't a ton of sort of marketing behind things. But again and again, when we have these discussions and we host perspective series or accessible community forums, it just always comes up that people aren't sure where to find resources for housing or accessible education, or, you know, a lot of different topics. So I think the more that we can sort of become like a database and a safe place for people to come with questions and queries and just continue storytelling and sharing our stories so we can learn from each other's experiences. Then, yeah, that's sort of the place that I would like us to keep being in the community. And, get the word out through things like this, more and more.

Sarah Smith 12:51

Yeah, very cool. Almost like a, like a one stop shop for whatever folks need.

Emily Chambers 12:56

Eventually, maybe. [Laughs]

Sarah Smith 12:58

[Laughs] Yeah. So we've talked a lot about, you know, the programs that ConnecTra offers and the community that's being sort of cultivated through the programs and services. I'm wondering, on sort of the flip side, the more challenging side, what is one of the most common challenges that clients come to ConnecTra with trying to solve?

Emily Chambers 13:21

Hmm, I think people are often looking for direction or resources or where to go for things. So, you know, we've had we host these things called Accessible Community Forums, and they're basically on topics where that we've heard come up again and again in the community. So we've had one on built environment, basically the environment that's around you in the community, within housing that's available to you. You know how accessible is Vancouver and BC in general, we've had one on accessible housing again. How do you apply for accessible housing? What are the gaps in the system that people falling through again and again. What is the you know, can we get help or other services in

place to fill out the paperwork? What if I can't physically fill out the paperwork? So, you know, I think we send out these surveys a month in advance of these forums, and we get so much feedback, and that is taken into consideration for other topics in future forums, or to start a new resource page for something like accessible education, we need to have, you know, resources on our website for this, because people are missing them. So, yeah, I think it's just sort of a it's a feedback loop with the events that we put on and then the feedback that we get that sort of inspire, okay, we haven't talked about this. I've heard about this a lot lately. You know, we have brainstorm sessions within the team every two weeks, and we kind of sit there and say, "All right, what do we want our perspective series to be on this month? Like, what would be a hot topic for the next forum?" And, yeah, so I think it's, it's a lot of, "Can you help me find this?" And then it's like, these resources do exist a lot of the times, and we just need to point somebody in the right direction. So again, sort of adding to that database that connectra.org can be or pointing out some of our partners, like SCI BC—Spinal Cord Injury—and Neil Squire, and being like, you know, these are other resources that you can look into.

Sarah Smith 15:30

Very cool. I love how much consideration is placed on the feedback that you're getting from the clients, and that that seems really important. I mean, if you're trying to achieve the goals of what your client population needs, it makes sense to integrate with those surveys, like you said, and to really be responsive to what people are asking for. So that's really great.

Emily Chambers 15:52

Yeah, and I think a lot of people in this community don't feel heard. So when we host these big conversations, and it really is an open and honest and safe and inclusive discussion. And you know, like our panelists for our ACFs, our Accessible Community Forums consist of government officials, city officials, people that can instigate real change around these issues. And I think to feel like you can be sitting in your living room at home on Zoom and talk to somebody that works for the city about the things that you've encountered is empowering, and we want to lift people up to make sure that they feel heard, because it's their experience.

Sarah Smith 16:32

Yeah, wow. I love that. Just being able to create a voice for folks who, or give space for a voice, for folks who wouldn't necessarily like, I don't know, in what other context it's easy to sit down and have a conversation with with government representatives about what you need, because I think it's generally trickier than that. Yeah, that's awesome. So sort of still,

along the lines of of the programs and services that you guys offer. What's the most challenging thing about your role within that?

Emily Chambers 17:06

I mean, I would say it's challenging to encounter and hear about the gaps in the system and feel sort of powerless towards you know, we gather all our feedback from our survey, we host the forum, and then we, we actually, like cater a list of government and city officials that are province wide to the topic, and we send out all of that information afterwards. And sometimes we get feedback from people saying, "Thank you so much for sharing this." Often we get no response. It doesn't mean that it isn't being read, but sometimes you're like, that's kind of all I can do. You know is is help provide a platform for people to get hurt, but it's also heartbreaking. Some of the things that you hear. We host these Perspective Series on the third Monday of every month, and they're kind of like a mini forum. So we have three to four panelists, and they basically speak to a topic in their experience. So they've been on parents of children with disabilities, parents with disabilities with children coming in and talking. We have one coming up on students with disabilities that are going to talk about their experience in the education system, and people are so generous and vulnerable with their stories in these sessions. And yeah, you can't help but be affected by that and just be like, "I want to help in some way," you know. So hopefully, as we spread awareness and share our stories, we bring more light to some of the gaps that are in the system. But it's just been incredibly eye-opening to to realize that people have these day-to-day experiences in the same place that I live, that I don't encounter and that I hadn't thought about before, you know? So that comes with, like, a lot of, "I'm really grateful for that," even though it is challenging sometimes.

Sarah Smith 19:06

Yeah, for sure, and I imagine that it's probably frustrating too. When you're creating these spaces and you're having these really important conversations, but what can be changed, and you're trying to facilitate that change. But like you said, if you're met with sort of radio silence when you pass it along, up the line, to government officials and whatnot, that it's a bit of a stuck point, it sounds like.

Emily Chambers 19:26

Yeah, you just do what you can. And I think again, just really knowing that my place is just to create the space and not necessarily be a part of the conversation, just sort of facilitate a space for people to have that conversation. So there's a fine line there to walk, and I think I'm getting better at it as we go.

Sarah Smith 19:44

Yeah, absolutely fantastic. And so you sort of answered this a little bit a moment ago, but I was wondering, in what ways has the role impacted you, or what's been sort of your biggest takeaway?

Emily Chambers 19:59

Yeah. I think, just going back to, you know, now when I play a gig somewhere and I have to walk down a flight of stairs, I think about the fact that this venue is not accessible to everyone, you know.

Sarah Smith 20:13

Yeah.

Emily Chambers 20:13

There's so much of that in the city. And, like, I wouldn't dare walk into an accessible washroom now, if there's something else available for sure. You know, I look at people that are in accessible parking spots a little bit differently if they're just sitting there waiting to pick somebody up. It's just a lot of things that I think fly under people's radar on a day-to-day business, or basis, if you're not living with a disability. So, yeah, it's been eye-opening in that way. And it's also, again, like I said, just brought this influx of people into my life, including the people that I work with, that are so rad that I don't know if I would have encountered on another, you know, basis, like, because you just, you just, especially, Vancouver can be a really cliquey city. Yeah, I'm like, so grateful to have met a bunch of new people that are different than I am.

Sarah Smith 21:04

Yeah, that's awesome. And that pulls into that connection piece again, which is the whole purpose of ConnecTra, at the end of the day, to create connection and community.

Emily Chambers 21:12

Exactly.

Sarah Smith 21:12

I love that. I have one more question. It's a bit of a fun one, if I may, and it might be something that you spoke to earlier, I'm not sure. But I'm wondering if you had no limiting factors whatsoever, so no resource constraints, no time limitations, what service or program would you most like to offer in the future that ConnecTra doesn't currently offer?

Emily Chambers 21:35

Wow, I would love to do like five in person events a week. Like, I just think it would be so cool to physically see people coming together for all of these different courses. You know, my favorite events that we do are the Perspective Series and the forums, because I just really love hearing people's stories and just, you know, like cultivating a space for that. So I think doing, when we are talking about doing sort of a forum in the future. We do have something similar coming up. That's a part of the Network Building Project on November 9 that is looking at newcomers with disabilities. We're hosting that with Mosaic. But I would love to see, yeah, I mean, maybe, I mean, you said no limits, so, yeah, sure, five days a week. But even if we could do like a monthly in-person Perspective Series or forum, think there's a lot to be said to feel the emotion in the room and be able to look and read and see someone's physical face as they're being really vulnerable and sharing things. So yeah, just more in-person stuff, getting to know the community a little bit better face to face would be so the dream. And to host a big VAMS summer concert, which would be very fun.

Sarah Smith 22:49

Ooh, both very fun.

Emily Chambers 22:52

Get outdoors, yeah.

Sarah Smith 22:55

A little music festival vibe there, it sounds like, I like it. I like it, very cool. Yeah. And the in-person forums, it sounds like, you know, it's one thing to converse over Zoom, and I think it definitely has its place, like we said earlier, for accessibility reasons and even, like, having a broader reach. But I agree with you, there's something about being in a room with someone that a screen in front of you takes away from just a little bit, and that element of connection just isn't quite the same when you've got that distance.

Emily Chambers 23:23

It's the physical energy. The feedback and the energy that you give and get from each other. And I think, yeah, I think it would be different to have a big forum with city officials sitting on a panel like hearing these people's stories and experience in person.

Sarah Smith 23:37

Totally.

Emily Chambers 23:37

It would be harder to turn away from and, yeah, just sort of uncomfortable, and like sitting in that, I think it would be really good.

Sarah Smith 23:47

Yeah, yeah, I think would be really impactful as well. And I mean, even on the side, whoever's coming to those that might create opportunities for networking amongst clients as well and sharing experiences and resources that I think you also don't quite get the same way in a Zoom. When you're in a large group, you don't have those opportunities to start conversations.

Emily Chambers 24:07

Yeah, absolutely. You know, when there's not like, little breakout rooms happening, it's also set, you know, we have almost, uh, upwards of 100 people coming to the forum sometimes, wow, you're all just little faces on a screen. And I doubt that you're like, scanning and looking through and saying hi to people and yeah. So you know, that's like another factor that I think would be so beneficial to like our community, meeting more of our community as well, right? Not even just connecting with resources and organizations, but making friends.

Sarah Smith 24:35

Absolutely, that connection piece, again. Fantastic. Well, thank you so much for taking the time to chat with us today. Is there anything else you want to share about ConnecTra, and do you maybe want to plug the website one more time in case folks want to follow up at the end of this?

Emily Chambers 24:49

Yeah for sure. It is connectra.org and if you go to connectra.org/events you can see our calendar of events, and you can register pre register for things on Zoom, or you can just drop into classes. We do have an Accessible Community Forum coming up on accessible education on November 18, so that's on our website, and you can go register for that. And yeah, we have this coaching coming up on Tuesdays in November that you can register as well. We're covering a lot of really cool topics, from how to manage your money and advocate for yourself to let's talk about sex. We're gonna go places we haven't gone before on the online platform, and I think it will be really cool to get feedback from the community.

Sarah Smith 25:34

Yeah, that's awesome.

Emily Chambers 25:35

So yeah, and you can connect with me anytime I'm at ehambers@connectra.org, so that's E, C, H, A, M, B, E, R, S @connector.org. Or info@connectra.org, I'll get those too.

Sarah Smith 25:48

Amazing. Well, thank you so much. That sounds like you have some really cool events coming up on a broad variety of topics, so something for everyone, I'm sure. And thank you so much for taking the time to chat with us today. And to all of our listeners, thanks for tuning in today. We hope you join us next time on Discover Stories.