

Episode 95: Creating Independence With Assistive Technology

Pt. 1 | Ean Price

Manisha Ramlu 0:09

You are listening to Discover Stories on Re-Imagine Radio, brought to you by the Vancouver Adapted Music Society. To learn more about accessible music programs and opportunities, please visit our website at www.vams.org. Now let's get into today's episode. Thank you for joining me today, Ean. Can you share about your role as a peer program manager and innovation strategist at Technology For Living?

Ean Price 0:48

Absolutely. So I've been working with Technology For Living for about six years now, and I absolutely love it. It's such a rewarding organization to be a part of. And I, fairly recently, I started as the Peer Program Manager, and day to day, I have a lot of meetings, a lot of emails, but also, more importantly is connecting with our members and that's so much fun. And then also working with an incredible team where we work on promoting the services that we provide and also organizing virtual and in-person events. And then, as the innovation strategist, I work with a lot of smart home technology, really testing it, making sure that it's a good fit for our members, and also working with the manufacturers to see how it could be improved upon to better serve people with physical disabilities.

Manisha Ramlu 2:06

Wow, you do such amazing work, and you have a lot of responsibilities on your shoulders, eh? [Laughs] Love that. So what are the most exciting advancements in assistive technology that are improving the lives of people with disabilities?

Ean Price 2:22

Well, two things. So within our organization, we have three different programs: PROP, our Provincial Respiratory Outreach Program, which provides respiratory devices and support. So, for example, ventilators. I use a ventilator myself and I think that technology is advancing with risk referral equipment, specifically at quite a rapid rate, which is really exciting to see, because my first ventilator, 20 years ago was about the size of a microwave and it only had a 30 minute battery, which, if you can imagine being on life support and only being able to be connected for a half hour, it is very limiting. And now the ventilators are about the size of a lunch box and they have a battery of around, I'd say, at least eight plus

hours. And so that has made a world of difference for myself and many of our members. And then second, another program within our organization is T.I.L., Technology for Independent Living, and we focus on a lot of smart home devices, and smart home tech has changed a heck of a lot, even in the last six or so years that I've been with the organization. Particularly voice control, being able to control lights and blinds and other devices in the home just by using their voice. Also, eye tracking has improved quite a bit. So for our members who are non-verbal that would still like to have the same amount of independence, I think that that's really incredible.

Manisha Ramlu 4:42

Wow. Yeah, that sounds very incredible. And I mean, that's technology increasing in the what last 10 to 20 years like, I can't imagine what the future will hold. Hopefully it's even more crazy than what we have now.

Ean Price 5:00

Yes, no, I agree. I'm really excited to see what we'll be able to offer, and just technology as a whole, and another even, even five years from now, particularly with the very rapid advancements in artificial intelligence, I think this will be a be a huge positive impact on the disability community.

Manisha Ramlu 5:27

Yeah, absolutely. I have to ask, in your ideal world with like AI and technology, how do you envision it, like, if you could create like the ideal world?

Ean Price 5:39

Well, that's a good question. I am really excited to have a robot in my house. [Laugh] Help out with some of the day to day activities, transferring me from my wheelchair to my bed and vice versa. I think just having a robot to do things in the house that I'm unable to do independently, I think that will be a huge game changer.

Manisha Ramlu 6:16

Yeah, I bet, a personal assistant robot. Well, hopefully that comes sooner than later. Awesome, so I have to ask, so how does you know, Technology For Living, support individuals with disabilities, living independently? Now, you talked about it a little bit with the voice command and the eye movement. But what have you what impact have you seen personally through your work?

Ean Price 6:45

Well again, respiratory equipment, such as modern ventilators that we provide to our members in British Columbia, I think that is an absolute life changer for, for many people, just being able to have that independence, and for the Peer Program, really the technology that we provide and the services that we offer, it's huge. I think from just within the limited amount of time I've been with the organization, but just hearing stories from our members and how much it's changed people's lives, particularly with isolation, I find that some people with disabilities, they don't want to feel like they're a burden, and so sometimes they don't want to ask for help as much as they need. And that can be very restrictive. Where they're in bed watching the same TV channel for five or six hours a day, just because they either don't have the care and support, or if they don't want to be that a burden, as I mentioned, and so, but even something as simple as being able to change the channels on the TV or adjust the lighting in the room if they want to take a nap, to be able to turn the lights off, and close the curtains independently, is such a huge impact.

Manisha Ramlu 8:39

Yeah, absolutely. I can't even imagine, you know, just these advancements that improves a little bit of quality of life. So, yeah, love that. How does your team collaborate with healthcare professionals, engineers and the disability community to develop and improve assistive technology?

Ean Price 9:02

Well, our organization has been around for over 50 years, especially T.I.L., and so I think that we're a very well-trusted organization, and that gives us the ability to provide feedback to health authorities and also to manufacturers. So for example, if a startup company has a smart device that they're working through, building the prototype, etc, then they quite often come to us and ask for feedback on how they can make their product better for people with disabilities. And I think that collaboration is so important because these devices, yes, are, are used by your average consumer, but more importantly, they have such a huge impact on our independence. And sometimes it can be as simple as having one feature or updating the user interface on the phone or tablet, which will make it much more accessible to people with disabilities, and that's really important.

Manisha Ramlu 10:27

Yeah, I bet. And I'm sure it's not like a one size fits all type of device. So is there, like a possibility to kind of add things, if necessary? Do you know?

Ean Price 10:40

Yeah, well, something that has been really exciting is many of the manufacturers that have come to us have asked for not just my opinion, but having a focus group. And we have able to provide some of those where a number of our members are able to provide that feedback. And I love it when I see the company frantically writing notes down, as everybody is giving their perspective, because you're right, everybody is very different, and things that are easy for me to do, for example, on the phone, are challenging for others, and vice versa. So I think having a very diverse, looking at it in a way where it's not just trying to meet the needs of a particular individual, but servicing everybody with a disability is really, really valuable.

Manisha Ramlu 11:55

Yeah, absolutely. And I'm so happy to hear that they're actually open to that feedback and taking account to everyone's needs. So what are some of the biggest barriers that still exist in accessibility and assistive technology and how can society work toward breaking them down?

Ean Price 12:18

Cost is an ongoing barrier. We're very fortunate to have this organization, our organization in British Columbia, but speaking with other provinces, these services aren't available there. There isn't a technology for living in every province, and I think that's something that I would love to see in the future, is other provinces, their health authorities really making it a priority to have organizations such as ours in every province, to provide these services, because without this, people can be very restricted of survival assistive technology they're able to obtain. And that's just not fair.

Manisha Ramlu 13:19

Yeah, I'm surprised there's actually, you know, not such accessibility available in different provinces. Do you see technology for living expanding to other provinces to fill in that those gaps?

Ean Price 13:36

I don't know. I think we're a relatively small organization, and expanding across Canada would be a huge undertaking, I think, for now, we're focusing on ensuring that people with disabilities, physical disabilities, that live in B.C. are best catered to, but so I don't think we will be expanding across Canada anytime soon. But I think it would be, it's a wonderful template for other organizations to adopt if they have the funding available.

Manisha Ramlu 14:22

Well, hopefully, you know, other provinces hear this podcast and get inspired and they're able to, you know, create an organization for their assisted living. So fingers crossed.

Ean Price 14:35

Yes.

Outro 14:39

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