

## Episode 33 | Serena Bains

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### **Graeme Wyman** 0:30

Hello and welcome to Discover Stories on Re-Imagine Radio. I'm your host, Graeme Wyman with the Disability Foundation. If this is your first time on Re-Imagine Radio, please like the video and subscribe to the channel. Today on the podcast, we have Serena Bains. Serena is a Youth Leadership Initiative coordinator with the Disability Foundation. Serena, thank you so much for coming on today. How are you doing?

### **Serena Bains** 1:05

I'm great. Thank you for having me.

### **Graeme Wyman** 1:06

Yeah, no, it's great to see you. So just jumping right in, perhaps you could tell our listeners what your role is as a Youth Leadership Initiative coordinator and how you got involved with the YLI project.

### **Serena Bains** 1:21

For sure, so my role with the Youth Leadership Initiative as a coordinator is basically doing a lot of outreach work. So I like recruit for the advisory committee that we're creating at the moment. I've recruited for our survey to get some more survey results. I track that engagement with members of the community as well, and then I also do presentations. And our project is nationwide, so this includes organizations from like Vancouver Island all the way to the Maritimes and to the territories too. So it's really exciting. And how I got involved in the Youth Leadership Initiative is that I was like, personally doing my own job

search, and I was realizing that I was facing barriers to employment. So then when I saw that there was a project that was looking to work on that, and as a youth with disabilities myself like to help dismantle some of those barriers to employment that youth with disability are facing, seemed like a great opportunity, so I definitely wanted to get involved.

**Graeme Wyman 2:24**

Yeah, no, that certainly sounds like the projects resonated with you, for sure. So recently, the team put out the results for their survey, but I wanted to take a step back, and I was just wondering when the team was drafting the survey for phase one. What was YLI's process in creating the questions, and what outcome did the team hope for?

**Serena Bains 2:50**

Yeah, so the process for developing the questions, actually Max was the lead on that. He's our one of the Youth Leadership Initiative coordinators as well, and he's responsible for research, and he had come up with a group of questions, and we all looked them over as a team. And the outcome that we were looking for when we were looking to the questions and determining if they were suitable or not, is we wanted to make sure that, firstly, like we were inclusive of all disabilities, so whether folks are vision impaired, are deaf, have psychiatric disabilities, physical disabilities, invisible, visible, whatever it may be, we wanted to ensure that anyone who identified as such could submit their own response to the survey, and then we also wanted to ensure that it was a relatively low barrier survey, so that folks could understand this survey quite quickly, even though we did want to do like analysis, just trying to make sure that it didn't come off like super academic and intimidating, and so that would create the opportunity for folks to disclose the, like, more personal information about, like, whether they've been victims of like, discrimination or ableism, or like, how confident they feel when they're searching for employment. And those are can be very personal things for folks to disclose. We just wanted to make sure that it was really accessible and inclusive of all folks.

**Graeme Wyman 4:21**

And from memory, I believe that you had 450 responses. So obviously the the survey did resonate with a lot of people. Was that a goal that you were hoping to get that number or was that a positive reaction that you got?

**Serena Bains 4:38**

Yeah, it was definitely positive. I think we actually expanded our goal into 500 so the survey is definitely still open if people are interested in filling it out and providing their experience. But yes, all of the responses that we've gotten were great, and all the feedback that we've

gotten from folks who filled out the survey and were kind enough to provide their experiences through our focus groups as well. We got to learn a bit more about their personal experiences that you can't exactly find through, like, surveys and is more conducive to, like, long form conversations. So that was great as well, and like all the feedback that we got from folks in the community that were proud that, like we were doing this work and like wishing us well to hopefully dismantle some of these barriers in the future.

**Graeme Wyman 5:28**

And just for our listeners, if there's anyone who meets the criteria for the survey, they can find that on the Disability Foundation website. Correct?

**Serena Bains 5:38**

That's correct. Yeah.

**Graeme Wyman 5:39**

And I believe it's under YLI. There's a specific tab for it as well. So one point that stood out to me from the results of the disabled youth survey was that a consistent thing was having low self esteem, disability discrimination, lack of workplace accommodation and hesitation in disability disclosure, how is the Youth Leadership Initiative looking to address potential solutions to these issues?

**Serena Bains 6:08**

Yeah. So the main medium through which we want to address like possible solutions to these issues is through our advisory committee, so that would be made up of folks with lived experience, academics, folks who work in accessibility and accessibility offices, like at post secondary institutions or at disability organizations, and employers as well, and then folks can come together and create like, well-rounded solutions to these issues. There was also some possible solutions that came out of the focus groups as well, where folks were more willing to speak about the things you mentioned, like discrimination and hesitation and disability disclosure. A lot of folks didn't mention it in the survey, but when they felt safe enough to speak about it in a like a round table conversation. They spoke about how, you know, they disclose their disability and then they face discrimination afterwards, because their employer either didn't understand what they needed at the time, didn't understand how to implement like accommodations, or just had ableist attitudes, and the youth didn't know how to, like, navigate that situation, so that brought up, actually, more problems than we needed to assess. Like, oh, how do we come up with solutions for

these problems that we didn't initially see in the survey? And a lot of the youth had some recommendations for that as well.

**Graeme Wyman 7:38**

Of course, probably it was much more eye opening once you open it up to the community.

**Serena Bains 7:43**

Definitely, 100%.

**Graeme Wyman 7:46**

Now this wasn't a question that I sent you, but it just popped into my head when we were having this conversation. You were recently on one of ConnecTra's Accessible Community Forums, and that was on employment and empowerment, and you were one of the panelists. How do you feel that that conversation went and just in general, again, probably if there was new things that were addressed that potentially will be put into the phase two and phase three of the YLI project.

**Serena Bains 8:23**

I think it really showed the importance of inclusive employers. I think when I entered that conversation, I had a lot of my own experiences where I knew that, like, you know, like, maybe I wouldn't personally, like disclose in an interview that I was disabled or I wouldn't personally ask for accommodations, but in that conversation, there was a lot of questions like how to do that properly, or how to find employers that are willing and open to learn and to hear that from the employers on the panel that they were willing and able to do that, I think it was really inspiring and showed that we're well on the way to, like, destigmatizing disability and creating more accessibility in not only like the physical workplace, but the virtual and hybrid workplace as well. And I think like tying that back into YLI, I think that's why it's so important that we're creating a multimedia toolkit out of the advisory committee, because now that work as we know it, has changed so drastically, it's really important that we have solutions, not only coming from the perspective of youth with disabilities, but from employers as well, and to implement that in all forms of work, so that folks have like a comprehensive, guide of solutions no matter what their situation.

**Graeme Wyman 9:59**

Agree, and you somewhat touched this in your last answer, but you mentioned in your bio on the Youth Leadership Initiative page that you're past passionate about disability justice. What does that mean to you? And how do you think we as a society, even outside of the workplace, can do better?

**Serena Bains 10:21**

I think what disability justice means to me is like the idea of considering disability and ableism and how it interacts with like other aspects of our identity. So I know for myself as someone who's like femme presenting and has quote, unquote, invisible disabilities, I definitely experience disability differently compared to someone who, say, is a man and has visible disabilities. So I think having that understanding of how, like I could have the same exact disabilities as someone else, but we may have completely different experiences, is really important to recognize. And then how do we, how do we create solutions that take into account the different experiences of each individual and like marginalized communities, especially, and I think that ties into how I think society could do better. Because not only I like identifying that, like folks do have these different experiences of disability, but I think having so much nuance and difference within the disability community, it shows how like the gaps in the medical model. So if we move to a social model of disability, I think we can do better as a society, because the social model, the social model of disability, recognizes that it's not my own disability that's disabling me, but like ableist attitudes and the barriers that society puts forward. So I think if we took that perspective, it would not only be like destigmatizing to the individual, like the person experiencing their disability, but I think it would create better solutions as well.

**Graeme Wyman 12:14**

Yeah, I know that very insightful answer, and as someone who also has lived experience with a disability. I know, you know, there's no handbook for every situation. Every situation is unique, and it should be approached as being unique. And I think, yeah, you've very much touched on that. So I know right now that while I is in phase two of a three phase program that our project, that you guys are putting together. But if someone, someone was interested in learning more about YLI or the Youth Leadership Initiative and how they could perhaps get involved in the advisory committee, or, again, the survey, obviously, how would they go about that?

**Serena Bains 12:58**

Yeah, so you can find us, like you said earlier, Graeme, on the Disability Foundation website, I think it's forward slash YLI, or you can email myself. [Sbains@Disabilityfoundation.org](mailto:Sbains@Disabilityfoundation.org), and we're always available for like greater survey respondents, if you're interested in the Advisory Council, or if you just like to volunteer and help out, the team that's always available as well. And like I said earlier, it's a nationwide project, so you could be anywhere in Canada and still contribute to this project and to the community as well.

**Graeme Wyman** 13:41

Now, are there any age restrictions at this time for, say, the advisory committee, or specifically the survey that our listeners might need to know?

**Serena Bains** 13:50

Yeah, so for the survey and the Advisory Council, the age range that we're looking at right now, that we define as youth, is 17 to 29 but there's no age restrictions for volunteers.

**Graeme Wyman** 14:02

Okay, great. Well, thanks. So since your time with joining the Youth Leadership Initiative team, what aspect of the project has personally stood out to you?

**Serena Bains** 14:14

I think what stood out to me the most is when I've done presentations to like, say, disability organizations, or just folks in the community about the work that we're doing, and hearing folks' stories at the end of the presentation and saying, like, hearing how it resonated with them, and just examples of how they've, you know, sought accommodation in the workplace and they didn't know how to get it, or even employers saying, like, you know, "Someone had asked me for an accommodation in the past. Like, I hate to admit it, but I didn't know how to provide that. And I was, like, anxious about, like, hiring this person with a disability." I think the honesty with which people speak, when we're like, speaking about this work, and when I bring up my own experiences of like, trying to find employment as well. I think it's really eye opening, and it shows how willing people are to learn and contribute to the solutions that we're trying to create as a community as well. And I think that's something I think that's something I want to emphasize as well. Like, I know we're a relatively small team, but all this work that we're doing is not work that could be done without the community. Like 450 members of the community filled out the survey, and dozens of more people are going to be involved through the focus groups and the advisory councils and everything that goes on. So this is all very collaborative work, and the willingness with which people are ready to contribute to that, I think, is what stood out to me the most.

**Graeme Wyman** 15:50

Well, that's fantastic too, that people are so open to the process, and it seems again, that people obviously recognize how meaningful the work is and what you're you and the team are trying to do. Yeah. So my last question today is, what do you hope the project will achieve in the long term?

**Serena Bains 16:11**

Yeah, thank you for the question. I was thinking about this one for a long time. I think that what I hope the project will achieve in the long term is a greater consciousness and understanding about the barriers that youth with disabilities face, and just a greater like empathy and understanding that youth with disabilities are facing these barriers and that everyone has a part to play in dismantling them. And I think especially for employers, it's important to recognize that like one may not have like the solutions right now or like the knowledge to implement those solutions, but I hope, like with the release of the multimedia toolkit and with the work done by the Advisory Council, that we'll be able to create the resources necessary for folks to educate themselves, and that, hopefully that will result in less barriers to employment, and also result in folks feeling confident when they seek out employment, because they know that, like these resources are available to employers and that hopefully in the future, folks have a better understanding of disability and how it interacts with work and employment.

**Graeme Wyman 17:30**

Okay, well, Serena, thank you so much for being on the podcast today. It was great to speak to you and learn a bit more about your experience with the Youth Leadership Initiative, and again, all the great work that you and the team are doing. I guess, actually, I guess I lied. I do have one last question. When will the toolkit be out and ready for our participants or listeners?

**Serena Bains 17:58**

I think we're in year two currently, so I think it would be sometime during 2023 so definitely keep an eye out on that. I will keep the community up to date as well. I think the advisory committee we're hoping will start sometime in the fall, and then once they meet throughout the fall and winter they're going to create the multimedia toolkit, and hopefully that'll be available next year.

**Graeme Wyman 18:27**

Perfect. Well, maybe that's another opportunity to have you back on the podcast to let us know what the advisory committee comes up with.

**Serena Bains 18:33**

Yeah, that would be great.

**Graeme Wyman 18:35**

Yeah. Well, again, thank you so much for being on Discover Stories today.

**Serena Bains** 18:40

Yeah, thank you so much for having me.

**Graeme Wyman** 18:43

And to all our listeners out there again, if you have not subscribed to the channel, please do as it does help with our reach. Thanks.

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